

Supernova and the Machine

Jacrispybensolo

Star Wars Prequel Trilogy / Star Wars - All Media Types / Complete
Star Wars: Rebellion Era - All Media Types



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Summary

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Description:

Two years after the events of ROTHS, in which Padme survived and went into hiding after faking her own death. She is at her lowest point when she stages a rescue for the Rebellion, and is caught by Darth Vader. She is taken to his castle, and surprised to find that she doesn't much mind it there...

Beauty and the Beast except it's Padme and Vader. Mind the tags — she is his prisoner in this fic, and this story starts at what she considers to be the worst time of her life.

Chapter 1

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a young boy lived in a slave's hut on a dusty brown planet, far off from the brightest light in the galaxy. Although he had no possessions of his own, the boy was generous of heart and spirit, raised by a mother who taught him to love.

But then, on a normal day like any other, a fabled Jedi Knight and a beautiful angel came to the boy's door, in need of help. Though he had little for himself, the boy offered what he could, and shared with his new friends. Impressed with the young boy, the Jedi Knight whisked him away into a world of myth and legend; a world with prophecies and magic, with angels and queens, a world where the young boy had only his mother's final words to him: "Now be brave, and don't look back." Though he tried, though he grew to be the fiercest Jedi Knight in all the galaxy, the fear never left the boy's heart. And he always looked back.

The boy grew older and wiser, but it was too late; for there was too much love in his heart. And as every feeling tore another scar deeper into his being, every fear to lose his angel ripping him apart from the inside, all he had was one voice. A dark shadow that whispered to him: we can save her.

Desperate to save the angel, the boy hid behind a monster of his own making and ravaged the galaxy. He crushed the prophecy with a single blow, he rid the world of its Jedi Knights, and he twisted the magic to fit his own ends. He burned on a field of lava and was placed in a black-cloaked prison, where he would burn for all time. He did all this to save his angel. And when she faded, the hate would twist inside of him until he took his final breath. Forever a scared little boy, hidden behind the unfeeling black mask of Darth Vader.

If he could learn to love again, if he could give up the hate that burned inside his heart before he took that last breath, his soul would be healed. If not, he was doomed to live on with the memories that haunt, to exist as more machine than man.

As the years passed, he fell into despair and lost all hope... For who could ever learn to love a machine?

The seedy underbelly of Coruscant was hardly known for its upstanding citizens.

Clutching her knapsack to her chest, a girl moved through the lower levels of the city planet. Two standard years in hiding and the sixth owner kicked her out of her apartment with no notice and sent her into the world at night, with no friends, no credits, and no hope of shelter. A comlink lay underneath her layers of dress, the girl not daring to even lift her wrist for fear of who might notice her tech.

Too many senators bought from the black markets of Coruscant. If her comlink fell into the wrong hands...

Well, there would be more than just street level grifters coming after her.

She scoured the streets, looking for any speeder left unattended by its owner — the girl she once was would be repulsed by thievery, especially against citizens so poor that they live in the lower levels of Coruscant, so destitute that they accepted life lived underneath others, taking the leftover trash from the upper level citizens; high ranking Imperials and senators that followed Palpatine, not out of necessity, but out of belief in his vision.

The girl that she was now had instincts higher than mere principle.

Survival. At all costs.

On the brink of death she was so close to giving up that medical droids actually felt her life slipping away. Heartbreak that was so biting, it actually disturbed her physiology.

By the time she woke up, all her friends counted her dead.

So she stayed that way.

She returned to Coruscant with the immediate plan to approach the now Emperor Palpatine. He would have killed her, but at least she'd have died with her final words on her lips, with the galaxy knowing that she tried to avenge her husband. That she didn't lay down and die after he was manipulated by a Sith lord, that she wasn't okay with his gruesome death on a field of burning lava. That there was good in him, and she would lay down her life for that good.

Then she remembered her children — her children made by her and her husband, made only by the will of their love. They stood as the living embodiment of the good in him, and if she went to Emperor Palpatine for revenge...

He'd know she survived, and her children along with her. He'd know the children of Anakin Skywalker were out there in the galaxy, their power in the mysterious energy known as the Force strong enough to defeat him. He'd have them killed before they took their first steps.

So she took to the lower levels. For the sake of her family.

She moved behind a crate as a Rodian landed its speeder outside a dive bar crawling with all the unsavory types that roamed the lower levels of Coruscant. The Rodian got off his speeder and with only a few words whispered to the bouncer, he was allowed in the bar, in front of the line.

Ah. A regular patron of that particular establishment. That particular establishment, where the fighting pits were housed.

Suddenly, her conscience about stealing from the less fortunate went flying down the planet's core.

The moment the Rodian entered the establishment, the girl hopped on his speeder and rewired the controls until it answered to her touch, and she kicked off onto the streets before the bar bouncer could even yell after her.

Before — during her old life, her *real* life — she rarely drove her own speeders. She had staff to pilot, or her husband would insist on doing it himself. Her own piloting skills were limited.

Over the past two years of living on the underground and stealing speeders every time she had to make a quick escape — well, she was piloting so well that her late husband would've been proud.

She hoped he was proud. Somewhere.

She swooped low to the streets as people yelled after her, most in languages that she couldn't understand without her old droid there to translate. She ramped up the speeder until she was going far faster than any reasonable regulation would have permitted. The wind whipped her hair so far back it nearly snapped her neck as she let out a cackle of delight.

The wind in her hair felt so *good* next to the acrid still air of the lower levels of the city. The air in her apartment hadn't been fresh since she moved in, and cracking open a window didn't help because it was just the same rotten, unpleasant odor from the outside. But flying through the air as she was then; for a moment, it almost felt the air of home.

For a moment, she was with her husband again. The best pilot in the galaxy.

Reaching the planet's core, the recommended action was to slow down and prepare for the elevation for entrance into higher levels, or to slow down to make a safe descent into lower levels.

Promptly ignoring the recommended action, the girl flew into the core as fast as the speeder would go, turned it completely vertical, and made for the upper levels of Coruscant.

Pulling up to executive apartments on the uppermost level of Coruscant, the girl unhooked the helmet from the back of the speeder and strapped it onto her own head. The chances of anybody recognizing a now-believed-dead senator from two years ago in the heavy airway traffic of the Imperial headquarters were slim to none, but the girl couldn't take her chances. Anyone knowing she was alive — knowing who she was visiting — it would ruin all her plans. Her vengeance against the man who took everything from her.

She stood on the porch and looked into the penthouse, knocking quietly. She didn't want to rattle the household. In case of... surprise visitors. Surprise visitors were known to visit Senate staff frequently since the rise of the Empire.

A bustle came from inside the apartments and the girl kept her hand hovering over her blaster holster. She'd never visited her old friend without notice before, and she would've given notice if her *comlink* was still working, or if she had the credits to *fix* the comlink, or if her husband was still alive to fix it for her —

The face of her former handmaiden came in through the viewport, as Sabe stayed back a few paces, her head tilted with a suspicious angle.

"Can I help you?

Sabe's hand hovered over her own blaster.

"It's me." The girl said, annoyance lacing through her tone before she remembered the helmet still on her head and the threadbare clothes covering her nearly emaciated body. "Naberrie."

The girl hadn't called herself by her former name since going into hiding. Padme Amidala, former Queen of Naboo, and member of the Republic Senate, died giving birth.

Naberrie was just a girl living in the lower level streets of Coruscant, being a thorn in the Galactic Senate's side when she could, and looking for more rebellious plots the rest of the time. Keeping tabs on her old friends and lost daughter through Sabe, her former handmaiden and aid to Mon Monthma, senator from Chandrilia. A friend of Padme Amidala's.

Padme Amidala would have been hunted by Palpatine's followers for her involvement in the Treaty of the Two Thousand. She'd have been hunted for her marriage to Palpatine's fallen apprentice, and bearing his children. Naberrie was nobody.

Sabe wasted no time in whipping her handgun out of her holster and holding it up to the transparisteel separating them.

"Prove it," she snapped.

With a barely contained sigh, Naberrie lifted the helmet of her head, just enough to uncover her face.

"Padme," Sabe breathed out as she dropped the handgun and opened the shaft window, allowing her entrance into the apartment. She had not taken to the new identity. At first Naberrie thought Sabe was acting out of habit, until cycles went by and Sabe was still stubbornly calling her by her old name. Refusing to let the past die.

For Naberrie the past went and died all on its own, giving her no choice in the matter.

"What are you doing here?" When Naberrie finally entered the apartments, Sabe immediately began fussing over her, taking the helmet off and offering her seats and refreshments. "Why didn't you call first? Senator Mothma could've been here."

While Naberrie took a seat on the sleek yellow couch from her old apartment, Sabe went bustling in the other room, looking for her server droid. Naberrie thought of her old friend, Mon Mothma. Another person who could never know Naberrie — Mon mourned Padme Amidala and progressed their old pans without her. Naberrie couldn't very well show up on her doorstep.

And Mon would tell Bail.

"I got kicked out of my apartment and didn't want to use a comlink on the lower levels." Naberrie explained as the serving droid came rolling into the room to offer her a beverage. She quietly took two beverages and several sandwiches, not looking Sabe in the eye as she did so.

"So where did that speeder come from?" Sabe's tone sounded uncannily like her mothers.

Not *her* mother. Padme's mother.

"I took it from a Rodian associated with the fighting pits."

The glass Sabe was holding clattered to the floor, and she shot Naberrie an exasperated look while the droid clambered to pick up the mess.

"You couldn't have stolen a speeder from, oh I don't know, someone with no power or connections? There's probably a signature on that speeder, or insignia, and it's parked at my apartment! You know there's suspicion surrounding the Senator. What if someone sees a stolen speeder sitting outside her aide's apartment? How would that look?"

"If it's a stolen speeder, then obviously you're not associated with them," Naberrie knew she was taking the attitude of a petulant teenager, but she couldn't help it. She was living on the lower level streets of Coruscant. It's not as if attainable speeders just flew by every day. "And if someone saw me here, we'd both be dead anyway."

Sabe looked up from the mess on the floor and let out a sigh. "You know what I mean, Padme."

Naberrie just rolled her eyes, and took a bite of her sandwich. Just bread and cucumber. With the rise of the Empire, food had become highly regulated, and the meager rations given even to the senatorial staff left a lot to be desired. Rarely any spices or flavoring, and she hadn't tasted a sauce in ages. Eating was no longer an activity to be done for leisure time, but only a means for survival so the citizens could keep serving their glorious Empire.

"I got kicked out of my apartment." She finally broke the silence. "It wasn't my fault this time. The owner needed the space for something else."

"For what?"

"I don't know. Probably crimes." She grabbed for the next sandwich that lay on her lap, refusing to look her old friend in the eye. Sabe still expected the *old* person, from her *old* life. Padme Amidala would be staging an intervention in the lower levels, finding shelter for the citizens, and working on a plan to eliminate the fighting pits, all while undermining Palpatine whenever it was safe to do so.

But Padme Amidala was a queen. A senator. A wife.

Naberrie was nobody.

"I have a new holo," Sabe said quietly, going toward the service droid who held out a datapad for her. "Breha was in the city last week, and I was able to download it when she wasn't looking."

"Okay," Naberrie only looked at her feet, hoping not to appear too eager. "I'll look at it."

Sabe threw up a holointage of a smiling toddler, her short hair braided and tied in a knot at the top of her head. She wore a white velvet dress and her big brown eyes shone out with all the light in the galaxy.

She had her father's smile.

After taking in the image and holding it in her heart for a few moments, Naberrie looked to the ground again and quickly wiped away the tears forming in the corner of her eyes.

"Any new developments?" She rushed out the question, trying to mask the lump in her voice.

Sabe moved closer to her, and laid a warming hand on her forearm. Naberrie didn't push it off, but she also did nothing to encourage the touch.

“Bail and Mon have been recruiting... like-minded people.”

“Recruiting? They’re telling people about this?”

“Only after checking their background. The only people who know the extent of all their plans are the two of them and Breha.”

Naberrie let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She — *Padme* — helped build the initial stand against Palpatine, back when he was the Supreme Chancellor. She was the one who encouraged their private talks. Although her only rebellious actions since the sack of the Jedi Temple involved inconveniencing low-level Imperials, it was still important to her that others carried out the work that she — that *Padme* — started all those years ago. *Padme* would’ve worked tirelessly to overthrow a fascist regime. Naberrie interfered with shipments from time to time. That was all the emotional and physical labor she had to offer.

“I did hear something,” Naberrie whispered, hoping she didn’t appear too interested. Sabe took the job with Mon knowing that she was the inside source for her former employer, but Sabe didn’t enjoy keeping up the charade. She was loyal, and had no wish to lie. “Something that might be of interest to Bail and Mon.”

“I’m listening...” Sabe, patient as ever, waited for Naberrie to continue.

“When the owner was kicking us out — me and all the other tenants on that level — my neighbors were talking about finding a pilot to fly them off Coruscant and bring them to family on Daltarra, a planet in the Pakuuni sector of the Outer Rim. These people had Imperial insignia all over their door, okay? They only lived on Coruscant, or as they called it, Imperial Center, because of its proximity to their Emperor. Palpatine loyalists and proud of it. Anyway, they said they can’t go there because the planet is full of...”

Naberrie didn’t like saying the word out loud. She didn’t even like saying it out loud as *Padme Amidala*. Saying it made it too real.

It’s the same reason she hadn’t said her own husband’s name since she lay in agony on the birthing bed, calling out for a dead man.

“Rebels?” Sabe finished, her casual tone coming off as almost callous.

So Mon had taken to using that word.

“Yes. So they might find sympathizers on Daltarra.”

Sabe pulled out her datapad and tapped away furiously, barely even stopping for breath, much less to acknowledge Naberrie.

“Sabe,” she asked. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting a message about Daltarra out to my partner.” She replied, as if it were obvious.

“Partner?” Naberrie stood and looked around the room, as if waiting for this mysterious *partner* to pop out from around the corner. “You’re telling other people about this?”

Naberrie stomped around the apartment, looking into every room and around every corner, looking for any sign of another person. “Did you tell them about me?”

Sabe stood up, no longer putting on a pretense of understanding. She raised her voice. “Of course not, Padme, but —”

“Don’t call me that!”

Looking somewhat chastened, Sabe lowered her voice. “Of course not. But rebellions can’t be won from secret conversations with three people in an apartment. We’ve been planning for years. Now it’s time to expand, to bring in more people, to start thinking about...”

She trailed off and the unspoken word hung thickly in the air between them.

“The galaxy has only been war-free for two years.”

“But if war is the cost of freedom —”

“YOUR HUSBAND DID NOT FIGHT IN THE CLONE WARS!” Naberrie screamed so loudly that she was certain other apartments could hear her, but she was past caring. “You didn’t stay up every night wondering if he was dead, if you’d never get to see his face again or be held by him, you didn’t stay up for months thinking you’d have a baby to raise all on your own! Your husband did not burn to death on a field of lava as a result of a war. Your husband was not groomed and manipulated by Palpatine, only to fall to his own demise, leaving you completely alone in the world.

“Who else’s husband, Sabe? Who else’s wife? Who else’s parents and children, brothers and sisters? How many people have to die screaming before we *stop*? ”

Naberrie sobbed out the last word and fell to her knees in a slump of defeat, letting her heart wrenching cries take over her entire body.

Sabe gently pulled her to her feet and held her as she sobbed, slowly leading her to the couch. The datapad beeped in the corner with a response from her contact, and Sabe waited for the girl to sleep before answering it.

Chapter 2

Days passed without so much as a word from Padme.

While her Queen slept, Sabe removed the stolen speeder from her apartment's landing pad, cooked all the best food in the apartment, and stayed in constant communication with her contact. Sabe had to pretend not to be interested in Bail's personal life, and pretend she only cared about the fledgling rebellion from a professional standpoint, as aid to Senator Mon Mothma.

But her contact had an in with Bail Organa. Sabe met the Mirialan at the cantina after work where most senators' aids congregated after hours; not so far from the senate building to be out of range, but far enough that their meager salaries could afford a drink or two. The contact herself brought up the rebellion to Sabe. She would never have betrayed Mon — or Padme — like that. But if the girl already knew, why not utilize her source with Bail Organa?

So she told the contact about Daltarra after Padme fell asleep. Even knowing it went against her wishes.

Padme woke only a few hours later, saying nothing but a few unintelligible grumbles of discontent, before going to the kitchen and taking the food Sabe had made and returning to bed.

And that's where she stayed. Everyday, without sleeping. She'd just lie there and stare at the ceiling, so quiet that Sabe had to check every few hours and make sure she was alive.

During her time as Queen and as Senator, Padme kept her style perfectly groomed and coiffed. Since her fake "death" and the actual death of her husband, Padme's previously luscious locks now just hang lankily from her head, blocking her wide brown eyes and clinging to her head. She wore the same threadbare outfit day in and day out, the spark in her face completely snuffed out. She remained indifferent to any semblance of personal hygiene or social interaction. She didn't even seem to care that she'd been thrown out of her seventh apartment in two years.

Sabe set up a fresher, and gently knocked on the bedroom door.

"Padme," she called. She had decided long ago that she wouldn't be calling her former Queen by the name Naberrie, and it still took conscious restraint to not call her Senator Amidala. "I've set up a fresher."

"Enjoy it," the monotone came back with no invitation to open the door.

Ignoring all sense of decorum, she sighed heavily and hit the button for the door to open. Padme lay sprawled out on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, completely expressionless.

"I thought you were taking a fresher."

"No. YOU are taking a fresher. It's been too long, and you can't just lie in bed all day. We need to find you a job, and a new apartment."

Of course Sabe would allow her Queen to stay in her own apartment as long as she desired. But her presence on the uppermost level of Coruscant was dangerous for everyone involved, especially if she wanted to keep her own death a secret. Mon Mothma could stop by at any time, not to mention any other staff member, or even an inspection from the Empire. All senators and their staff were closely watched for any sign of rebel activity.

So what would happen to her if they found previously-thought-dead Senator Amidala in the apartment? What would happen to Mon Mothma? The best case scenario was an investigation that led to everyone's arrest for conspiring treason.

"I still have some leftover credits from Padme's life." Sabe fought to not openly roll her eyes at the mention of Padme as a totally different person. "I can't just go looking for a job. What would I even do? Public service is the only profession I've been trained for, and potential employers ask too many questions."

Not having a good answer to any of these, Sabe only remained silent and stayed beside her old friend.

"I don't even know why I'm still here." Padme whispered, and Sabe knew she didn't just mean in the apartment.

Letting Padme rest on her shoulder, she walked the girl to the restroom and left her in front of the fresher.

After listening for Padme to get into the fresher, with the water obscuring her hearing, Sabe pulled up her comlink.

The contact answered the call wearing a helmet like none Sabe had ever seen before — it wasn't a speeder helmet like Padme wore, it certainly wasn't Mandalorian, or the helmet of a trooper. Its expressionless eyes remained slanted and cut her face in half. The top half of the helmet was obscured by a hood and the bottom half was covered completely by a vocabulater.

She shouldn't parse out exactly why the contact would be wearing a helmet, but Sabe had grown tired of games, and people hiding behind masks.

"Hello?" Sabe asked, trepidation filling her heart and seeping into her voice. "Is that you? Why are you wearing that helmet?"

It had only just occurred to her that it might not be her contact at all, and the comlink had fallen into the wrong hands.

There were whispers in the Senate of "the Emperors mad dog." A masked and cloaked beast that hunted down Palpatine's enemies and enforced Imperial rule with a merciless fist. The mad dog was deferential only to the Emperor himself and had jurisdiction wherever he pleased.

Sabe could only hope it was just tales weaved together, possibly by Palpatine's loyalists, to strike fear in the hearts of potential rebels.

Now she wasn't so sure.

“It’s me,” the masked voice reassured her. She only narrowed her eyes in answer, the disbelief clearly written on her face.

“Are you alone?” the mask asked and Sabe gave the slightest nod of her head.

With a sigh, the masked figure held the sides of her helmet, and the piece came apart at the eyes, revealing the face of the Mirilan that Sabe had come to know.

“Why are you wearing that thing?” She asked before releasing a breath that she had held in panic.

“I’m on a mission,” the prim accent came back in response. “Not everyone can hide in plain sight all the time.” I’ve been attempting to contact you. There’s been an incident on the mission to Daltarra.”

Dropping all pretense, Sabe sat up straighter and her eyes went wide.

“An incident?!”

“Daltarra had been occupied by Imperial forces. Bail went in undercover for a relief mission and walked right into a trap. Communication with his backup ship was cut off, and they were all taken prisoner.”

Her blood ran cold and goosebumps prickled all over her body.

Bail? *Taken prisoner?*

“Was he...” She didn’t want to finish the question.

“He’s scheduled for execution in two standard days. The Empire wants to make an example of him.”

Her entire body pulsed with nerves and with fury — He was to be *executed*? Without trial?

Sabe was the one who told him about the mission. How would she ever explain this to Mon?

“Is there anything we can do? Can we get a stay of execution while we figure out a plan for extraction?”

“The Emperor and his *mad dog*,” The contact’s words dripped with malice. Her distaste for the rumored second-in-command was no secret in their little rebel cell. “Want to cur rebellion at its starting point. Before you can gather the resources to truly revolt. I can’t imagine either of them allowing a stay of execution.”

The girl had contacts within the Emperor’s inner circle; she would know better than anyone.

But Sabe was trained by Queen Amidala — the real Padme, not the stranger standing in her fresher — to always keep hope. The Queen didn’t accept defeat lying down when Naboo was invaded by the Trade Federation. And Sabe — a true Nabooian, not the likes of Sheev Palpatine — couldn’t lie down now. Not when her friend’s life was at stake.

“Thank you. Over and out.”

Sabe clicked off the comlink when she felt movement from outside her door.

Straining her ears, she could no longer locate the sound of the fresher's running water. In one swift movement, she hopped over the side of the couch and ran to the other room, to find a stricken Padme standing in the doorway, arms shaking — she didn't know with fury or with nerves.

"Bail was captured on Dalarra." It was not a question, and though her voice shook, she spoke more confidently than she had in nearly two years. "He was captured on a mission that I suggested."

"Padme." Sabe reached for her old friend's arm, but the girl shook her off.

"I'm going."

Padme stomped into the bedroom, leaving her dumbfounded. She followed Padme into the room, where she found her throwing her meager belongings into a knapsack with increased speed and aggression, while she tore through the room, searching for anything she might need on her journey.

"Padme, you can't just go after Bail," Sabe said, guilt coursing through her at discouraging the only person taking action. "We don't even know where he's locked up, and it's probably heavily armed and armoured. You think they'd just Senator Bail Organa in a cell and not assign him stormtroopers?"

Throwing her knapsack over her arm and sholdering past Sabe, all Padme had to say in response was, "You think I'm afraid of stormtroopers?"

"I think you should be!" Sabe whirled around, and cut off Padme's path. "And if you aren't afraid of stormtroopers, you certainly will be afraid of the Emperors *mad dog!*"

"Sabe," Padme said calmly, looking her directly in the eyes. "I am going to the Imperial prison ship, and I am going to break out Bail Organa. You can either help me and let me borrow a droid and a ship."

She pushed past Sabe again, and hit the door hatchway.

"Or you can get out of my way."

"You're sure we're cloaked?"

Naberrie asked the droid as she busily worked beside her at the controls of the ship. LT-S3, the reconfigured Imperial droid that Mon Mothma stole for her own purposes, punched in the coordinates for the prison ship on the navicomputer, murmuring to herself.

The reconfiguration gave LT a... strong personality.

Padme's droid R2 had a strong personality. He served her daughter now, likely with a mind wipe. The thought of the little blue astromech from Naboo losing its spirit tugged at her heart, and for a moment, she felt like Padme again.

"The ship will not detect us." The droid answered in her normal monotone, but Naberrie could detect a slight hint of irritation in her voice.

Padme Amidala was never much of a pilot. She only flew when Captain Typho or Panaka was unable to escort her. She had no clue how a ship could cloak itself, or how to work any of those controls. All she could do was make simple jumps to hyperspace, land on uncomplicated landing pads with clear direction, and fly in a straight formation. All the basics taught to teenagers in flight school.

Any atypical maneuvering she'd preferred to leave to her husband or pilot.

Letting herself trip from the jolt of exiting hyperspace (Padme would've grabbed a handle), Naberrie brought herself upright and put her two blasters in their holsters.

"Did they see us, LT?"

"We have remained unnoticed, miss."

"And you have a copy of the prison schematics?"

That was the only pinprick in her plan. The one element where she had to rely on Sabe, which really meant relying on Mon Mothma without making her presence known. With their contact, Sabe was able to download the schematics rather quickly to LT-S3.

"Yes. Just like I did when you asked earlier."

Naberrie ignored the irate droid and went to the airlock of the ship, waiting for LT to dock.

"Mistress?" The droid yelled, and continued before Naberrie could answer. "Do you have a plan? For when you actually get onto the ship?"

"Yeah," Naberrie called back. "Walk into Bail's cell. I need you to keep the ship ready to fly."

The ships locked onto each other when a message came through the communications console. Like the Imperials realizing that a cloaked ship dropped out of hyperspace in front of them and docked onto their airlock.

Choosing to leave LT to do as she was programmed to do and pretend to be an Imperial, Naberrie opened the hatchway to the prison, and holding up her blaster, she walked through.

She had expected an official Imperial ship to look similar to a Republic battleship. This was somehow more clean, more sterile, more devoid of any personality. The government that she fought so hard for — that her husband went to war for, that she dedicated her life to building and protecting — was gone for the glorification of Sheev Palpatine, while everything else was nothing more than clean lines and corrupt officials.

The sound of boots stomping closer and closer made Naberrie's heart race and her spirits lifted as she ran down the corridor, searching for the cell block that LT told her. The closer the troopers got, the more exhilarated she felt, at times even slowing down to see how close they could really get before she sped up again.

Whipping around a corner, she came face first into a trooper with pristine white armor, whiter than she'd ever seen on a clone. A man who had never seen battle, had only been given security duty on a prison ship.

“I’ve found the —” Naberrie didn’t give him a chance to finish before setting her weapon to stun and taking the man down with one shot. Without turning back, she hit the troopers coming up behind her as well, letting out a cheer of glee as she made her way down the corridor where Bail was being kept.

She wondered if this was how Anakin felt in battle.

More boots sounded closer and closer as Naberrie slid in front of the shielded cell that held Bail Organa. Without her droid companion, fiddling with the controls took longer than she would’ve preferred with blasters making their way toward her. She stopped her wire maneuvering and whipped out her blaster to hit the approaching troopers, when she heard Bail’s questioning cries through the door.

“Stay quiet, I’m coming!” She yelled through, silencing the man inside while she finally got the hatched door to slide open.

“I thought you —” Bail’s eyes went wide when he looked at her, his face still in the middle of his sentence. His mouth hung open and when he recovered from the shock, he backed up into the corner, as far away from Naberrie as he could get, his arms and legs shaking.

“What are you?!” He rasped out in barely more than a husk of a whisper. “A changeling? Somebody playing a cruel joke?”

As more troopers came up the hall, Naberrie had to leave the cell to blast them all down, before coming back in to find Bail still staring at her with wide disbelief.

“Bail, I have no time to explain, we need to leave!”

The sense of urgency totally escaping him, Bail only backed further into the corner, refusing to look Naberrie in the eye.

“I’m imagining this.”

Growing frustrated with his insistence on playing with both of their lives, Naberrie moved closer into his space until she was only inches from his face while he still attempted to shy away from her.

“Bail, it’s me.”

“I watched you die.” His voice grew thick and tears filled his eyes. “You can’t be real.”

“Even if I’m not real, I’m your best shot at getting out of here!” Naberrie snapped, grabbing Bail’s wrist and physically yanking him out of the cell. “And my daughter will not grow up without you.”

She pushed him into the corridor and tossed him a blaster, before whipping her own out. Bail, inexperienced at best with a blaster, made his way respectfully through the small group of troopers that attempted to stop them.

They ran around the corner, the entrance to her ship in eyesight, and Bail only a few paces ahead. The weight lifted from her chest with every step closer to the doorway, and a smile actually started to form. Bail saw her. Maybe this was how she’d reintroduce herself to him. This could be how she comes back, how she gets to meet her daughter —

The brief dream was cruelly cut away from her with an arm that pulled her back and blaster leveled at her head. Bail was only steps away from the ship. If LT kept it running, he could still make it.

“Go!” She shouted, ducking out of the grasp of the stormtroopers, all of them managing to just miss her head. “Just go!”

“I can’t just leave you!” Bail called back, hysteria seeping into his voice, though he backed closer to the entry as more stormtroopers filed into the halls.

“Please,” Naberrie cried out before a trooper finally got his hands on her, bringing her to the ground as he pulled the blaster out of her grip like it was nothing. “For her.”

Before the world went black, all she saw was Bail Organa boarding the stolen ship.

She couldn’t have said how much time passed. It could’ve been days. It could’ve been hours. It could’ve been minutes. They didn’t even mistreat her — only sat her in a black paneled room with only a single folding table and chair for company and left her there to rot. Her eyes would flutter close and she’d have to slap herself to *stay awake*. There was nowhere to sleep in her ray-shielded cell block, and the stormtroopers stood stoically outside her door, unyielding and unfeeling.

The stormtroopers were merely another mystery for her to solve. Their white bucket helmets had a similar design to that of the clone troopers, but with none of the personality. Captain Rex had dash marks on his helmet, and it’s color hadn’t been white the entire time Padme Amidala knew him. She hadn’t actually known him, not really. All of Anakin, Obi-Wan, and Ahsoka’s battle stories heavily featured the loyal captain.

The small part of Padme that still lived hoped that Captain Rex got away. That he didn’t betray the Jedi and he wasn’t forced into serving the Empire. Clone troopers were supposedly decommissioned after the Clone Wars ended, but how could Palpatine have amassed a trained army in so short a time? They must be clones.

Padme Amidala fought to stop the creation of clones. To give the clone troopers the same rights and freedoms as every other citizen of the Republic.

Until every other citizen of the Republic lost their rights too.

Padme might’ve attempted a conversation with the stormtrooper — find out who they are, where they came from, and what they wanted. She’d be planning her escape already.

But Padme Amidala had a safe place to land. Naberrie had no husband, no friends, no ship, and no contacts. All she had was a folding table and a cell, guarded by a bored clone in white armor.

Bail Organa got away. He could raise Padme’s daughter. That was all that mattered.

The sound of more boots came up the hallway, and a second trooper stopped in front of the first, saluting before saying, “Lord Vader wants to see the prisoner.”

The first trooper paused and slowly tilted his head to the side, and even with all features obscured, Naberrie knew the trooper was skeptical.

“Vader’s here?” He asked slowly. The name was spoken with a quiet fear, like if he said it too loudly, the man himself would apparate in their presence

She’d never heard of a Lord Vader.

“The Admiral says he saw the security footage of the breakout and left immediately on his own shuttle. It’s why no one else has seen the prisoner. He demanded to be the first to question the rebel.”

Her heart thudded so loudly in her chest that Naberrie was sure the troopers could hear it through the ray shield. Sweat trickled her brows and her shoulders sat completely stricken, like she was unable to move even if she wanted to.

Lord Vader wanted to see *her*? Okay, so she broke a prisoner out of jail. But other than that she was completely harmless — and genuinely had no real information on the fledgling rebellion.

And this Lord Vader could torture her for as long as his heart desired, she would never give up Sabe or Mon. This Vader would just have to kill her.

Maybe it was for the best. She — or Padme Amidala — led a good life. Naberrie overstayed her welcome in the galaxy. Now she knew her purpose for staying alive these two years were so she could rescue Bail from Imperial prison. Her duty was over, and all of her identities could finally be put to rest.

She closed her eyes and accepted her final days in the galaxy, and hoped Sabe would be okay. That she would find peace where Naberrie never could.

Chapter 3

The light stung her eyes.

Naberrie held up a hand to cover the streaming white and yellow from her face, when she finally snapped to attention, realizing that she was no longer in the Imperial cell block. There was no ray shield holding her in.

Her feet lay flat against the floor, and she could tell it wasn't solid ground. It had the kind of inexplicable movement of space floating beneath her.

Did Sabe come back for her? Did she, Mon, Bail, and the Contact all decide that someone was worth the risk?

Surprised at how her heart fluttered at the thought of a rescue, Naberrie sat up straight to find her old friends, when an invisible wall pushed her back down.

A restraint. So she was still a prisoner. Was she being transported?

All the memories came back. A man in a black mask and cloak, cowering in the corner of her room, moving closer. The flash of a crimson lightsaber falling on two innocent troopers. The cold emanating from him so biting that it was almost a comfort. The Emperor's second hand, a Lord of the Sith, hovering over her, finally bringing his fingers to her neck.

A jolt of electricity ran from her neck and down to her shoulders from the memory. She nearly shivered at the thought of the touch.

Her blurred eyesight became clearer, and in her field of vision, at the pilots seat of the ship, sat the Dark Lord himself. If he knew she was awake, he made no sign of it, concentrating only on the controls laid out in front of him, the blurred lines of hyperspace lighting up the black of his helmet.

"Where are you taking me?" She asked, surprised to find her voice still groggy.

Vader turned and looked at her, almost like he was surprised to find she was awake.

"Well?" Her voice got louder. "I asked where you are taking me."

He ignored her completely and looked only at his navicomputer. Her body jumped as they came out of hyperspace, in view of a planet with orange cracks so bright, Naberrie's heart lept in her throat.

It couldn't be?

The ship settled down on red and orange fields of lava, the flames dancing around each other in a synchrony of destruction, with Naberrie still strapped into the flight chair beside the menace of Darth Vader.

"Why are you bringing me here?" Naberrie whispered, attempting with all of her strength to keep her voice even as she fidgeted out of the restraints. "How do you know about Mustafar?!"

Her voice cracked on the last word and she felt her eyes grow in size, as all the anger simmering in her chest since Bail's escape burst out.

"Is this what the Empire calls torture?! At least the Separatists had the common decency to use physical pain, not this excruciating mental torture!"

She fought with all her might against the restraints holding her wrists, as Darth Vader landed the ship without sparing her even a look back. As if he couldn't even hear her over the sleek black helmet that carefully guarded his true face.

"Only a coward hides themselves." She spit out at him, trying every method to get a rise out of the stoic black figure. He was probably there that day on Mustafar. He probably watched as Anakin was burned alive. She closed her eyes, attempting to forgo the detailed picture of Anakin's death. The pain he must have felt. He was alive while the flames licked at his flesh, he felt his own bones melt away into ash. Did he call out for her? She was only steps away, her pathetic body unconscious in the ship. Did he die believing she'd betrayed him to Obi-Wan Kenobi? "You're protected by that monstrous suit while others screamed and burned. How many people have you killed, Lord Vader?"

"Or should I say Darth? You are a Lord of the Sith, right? The ancient enemy of the Jedi, too cowardly to confront the members of the Order yourself, so your Master manipulated others into his dirty bidding!"

Vader allowed Naberrie's diatribe in silence, his demeanor so unresponsive that he might've been dead if not for the landing of the ship. Giving up the task of escaping from her restraints, Naberrie only glared at her captor, accepting her ultimate fate. She accomplished what she set out to do: she freed Bail. Her daughter would grow up with her adopted father.

There was nothing left to live for. She could die with a shred of dignity that she saved an old friend's life. She didn't die in the lower levels of Coruscant, her body discovered by nameless and faceless neighbors. Sabe would have never known if she died that way.

Now Sabe can live knowing that her former Queen had a better death than that. No one would have to worry about Naberrie anymore, or force her to be Padme Amidala. Amidala died on Mustafar — it was only fitting that Naberrie died there too.

Vader finally turned from the console and looked at Naberrie — at least, she thought he was looking at her. It was difficult to tell anything through those wide lifeless orbs. He lifted a hand to her restrained wrist, and Naberrie attempted to hide her flinch. She didn't want him to see her fear.

But he had the Force. Couldn't he... sense it? Anakin could sense when she was afraid.

Much to Naberrie's surprise, Vader paused his hand in mid-air when she flinched back.

"I'm taking off these restraints," Vader said slowly, as if she were dense. "That's all."

"Oh I feel so much better now. You're only going to take off my restraints, so you can kill me outside of the ship. Such a comfort."

Vader held her gaze and without even the twitch of a finger, her restraints lifted and snapped in the air.

"I'm not going to kill you."

Naberrie moved to get out of her seat and paused at his comment.

If he's not going to kill me...

It was no secret what happened to women in times of war.

But if those were Vader's intentions, he could've done that on the ship. Or in the prison cell. She wasn't even sure Vader *could* do that if he wanted to. The brief touch from his fingers (her neck still burned at the thought of it) felt so much like Anakin's mechanical hand. Vader's limbs were likely all cybernetic.

Not that she ever thought of him as a human, but the fact that he was another General Grievous was a surprise indeed. She'd dealt with Grievous. She could deal with the likes of Darth Vader.

Gathering the bit of dignity that she could muster under these conditions, Naberrie stood to her full height and raised her chin at her captor. All she wanted was to lie down for a nap, but the little bit of Senator Amidala that still occupied a small part of her brain wouldn't let her look tired in front of him. Even with raised chin, Vader towered over her. She barely reached his shoulders, and his width was at least twice her own.

"Just so you know," she grabbed onto his elbow as he passed, bracing herself for a reaction. There was none. "It doesn't matter how long you torture me. I'll never tell you anything." She wasn't entirely sure why she said that — even if his torture worked, she had no information to provide.

Vader's shoulders sharpened and his head turned. He stayed with his elbow in her palm.

"I'm not going to torture you" he asked simply, as if it were obvious and she should have known. "If I wanted to torture you, I would have done it in the prison."

Despite her better judgment, Naberrie felt slightly chastened. She dropped his elbow and primly looked up at him, flexing her fingers to get the linger of his touch off of her skin.

"Well then. After you."

Vader stalked past her, his cloak billowing behind him, and Naberrie trailed silently, keeping her eyes peeled to the back of his helmet.

Getting off the ship, Naberrie expected to see the landing pad where she'd argued with his husband two short years earlier, where she'd begged him to run away with her.

She stopped when she saw the black fortress at the summit of a hill, long moats of lava flowing up its side, providing orange light to the blackness of Mustafar.

"What is this?" She asked, looking from Vader and back to the castle.

"My home."

The ominous steps were carved of onyx, and Vader took each step carefully, his head turning after every step, as if making sure that Naberrie would follow. As if there was somewhere else to go. Her only current options were to follow him, jump into a lava pit, or run away and be inevitably caught only moments later, angering the Dark Lord even more.

The heavy doors flew open with a swish of the hand, and Naberrie cringed at the use of the Force. It was an insult to all those who lost their lives for a person such as him

to flagrantly use the Force... Anakin died. Obi-Wan ran to exile. Ahsoka was likely killed on Mandalore. And this man openly used the Force for simple tasks, such as opening a door that he was totally capable of pushing?

"You could've used your hands," she chirped up and immediately regretted it. Naberrie hardly ever spoke. She just had to choose that exact moment to let her tongue loose?

"Why would I, when I can use my mind?" The heavily modulated voice sounded almost... playful in his response. Naberrie shivered at the thought of Darth Vader ever being playful.

Taking a deep breath, she moved through the threshold of the entryway, and covered her mouth as she gasped.

The grand foyer of the castle had vaulted ceilings that stretched toward the sky, so tall that Naberrie had to tilt her neck all the way back to see the top. Every step they took echoed off the walls, free of any ornamentation or personality. The black stone lived only on the exterior, the inside made completely of varying shades of black and grey chrome. Another place built by the Empire that was too sterile to be truly comfortable.

"It's rather dark in here," Naberrie noted, again shocked at her willingness to complain to Darth Vader. Even as Padme Amidala, she tended to keep complaints to herself.

"Oh," Vader's hands rifled through his utility belt, his voice actually sounding shocked. "I forgot."

He pulled out a remote control device, and with the slide of a finger, lights turned on in the castle.

"Is that too bright?"

Naberrie only stared back at him in response, eyebrows raised and chin tucked in. What did he care if it was too bright for her?

Vader kept staring at her expectantly until she finally spit out, "It's fine."

He nodded, as if content with her answer and seeing no other problems with their current situation. "Good. I will get you your own remote, so you can control the temperature and light yourself. Any preference of yours is okay with me."

Before Naberrie could ask why he was allowing her to dictate everything regarding the comfort of his castle, Vader continued.

"There are five household droids. I have commanded them to assist with your every need. B2 will be along shortly to show you to your room. You will have free run of the castle — except the west sector. It is very important that you do NOT go in the west sector." He shouted the last sentence, and Naberrie flinched. He slightly lowered his voice. "The elevator has been stanchioned off, to avoid any... confusion."

He said the last word slyly, like he didn't believe Naberrie's potential presence in the forbidden west sector would be a result of confusion.

“Do you understand?!” He snapped, his deep voice sharp under the pressure of yelling through a modulator.

“Yes, I understand,” Naberrie said, totally exasperated. “I’m not interested in your west sector anyway. Don’t flatter yourself.”

A noise came out of Vader’s mouthpiece that was probably as close as he could get to a conceding sigh.

“You can’t go in the west sector, but you can go anywhere else in the castle. You can’t go outside either. Mustafar is not the kind of place to run around.”

Naberrie rolled her eyes. As if he had to tell her.

“If you wish to see the outside, there are windows upstairs overlooking the planet.” Apparently done standing near her, Vader moved toward the dual staircase, climbing the one to the left. “Not that it’s much to look at anyway.”

Forgetting herself, Naberrie let out a chuckle. Vader whipped around, his cloak flying behind him, as he stared down at her.

Not his normal threatening gaze. Something softer, more earnest. The normally hard lines of his suit softened at the edges, and he tilted his head down at her. Naberrie fidgeted uncomfortably. Like Darth Vader was seeing her — not seeing Naberrie the rebel fighter, but really seeing *her*, Padme Amidala.

“I hope you like it here.” Although the deep and sharp modulator was the same, it was like another voice spoke for him. A kinder, more earnest voice.

Their moment over, Vader stalked up the stairs, leaving Naberrie alone in the cold sterile room, having no clue where her rooms were located, and not wanting to go searching for them in case she happened to stumble upon the west sector.

As if on cue, a black server droid, carefully trimmed red and gold, whirred into the room so quickly, she nearly bumped into Naberrie.

“Hey Mistress,” The droid said, as Naberrie just gaped back in response, trying to parse out how a droid owned by the likes of Darth Vader could be so flippantly casual with its greetings. It barely even sounded like a droid. More like a person talking through a speaker.

“Hello,” Naberrie said, not quite sure how to respond to a droid such as this.

“I’m B2. I’m the head of the household staff here at Fortress Vader.”

Fortress Vader? Naberrie looked up at the steps where the Dark Lord walked only moments ago, and rolled her eyes at all the drama.

“I’m Naberrie,” she said. Though the name had been with her her entire life, it still sounded foreign on her tongue. A strange wave of longing for the name Padme washed over her, and she pushed it away. She could not reveal her name to this droid that lived in service to Darth Vader, therefore to the Empire.

“C’mon honey, I’ll show you to your room,” B2 activated a control on her body, and small flames pushed her up so she could glide the stairway. Naberrie remembered her old friend R2.

He would've liked B2.

As Naberrie walked the glistening chrome steps, she listened to B2's welcome speech, which basically boiled down to everything Vader had already told her: Don't go in the west sector, and don't go outside.

"There's four more members of staff," B2 leaned in to tell Naberrie as she reached the top step, her movements like that between old friends sharing bits of gossip.

"FX-6 is the medical droid on site. Says he's been with Lord Vader his entire life. Very self-important, thinks he runs the place."

Not knowing if it was appropriate to comment on the personality of a droid, Naberrie only kept her eyes peeled to the ground as B2 continued on.

"But I run this place. He can't handle it. Constantly trying to undermine me in front of the other droids."

"We need a medical droid on site?" Naberrie asked, not wanting to engage this particular line of discussion, but feeling awkward remaining silent. "There must be medical centers somewhere in this system."

"Lord Vader needs FX here with him at all times." B2 said decisively, shutting down the line of questioning.

"We have a chef droid as well, SPA2LA. You can call 'im Spat if you like. The rest of us do. Make the finest Smoked Kaadu Ribs this side of the Rishi Maze! Don't tell him I said that. Like FX, Spat can get a big head. Spat'll cook you up whatever you like. Lord's orders."

"Darth Vader?" Naberrie interrupted. "Darth Vader ordered Spat to cook me whatever I want?"

"That's right."

Darth Vader had to be the strangest person to ever imprison her. Was this some kind of Imperial method of torture? Gain a person's trust before killing them? No one had taken her personal order since she was a Queen. And even then, the customized meal usually came at the price of a dinner with various Nabooian dignitaries.

"The Lord has a astromech too. Wild little thing, no manners to speak of. *He*'s the favorite of course. You know I haven't had an oil bath for myself in nearly three standard months? K5 has had *four*." Naberrie didn't say anything, hoping for a natural break in the conversation. "A'course you can have a bath whenever you please. Find me or my assistant RJ-8T, we'll set it up for you. Just call 'im RJ."

Naberrie visibly shuddered at the thought of taking a bath at Fortress Vader. At taking off her clothes at all in Fortress Vader. She couldn't be *naked* here. What if Vader walked in? With those bulbous black eyes staring at her, totally unmoving?

Not that she planned to stay at Fortress Vader long enough to take a bath. There were three obvious options. 1. Wait for Vader to stop sitting on his hands and just kill her already. 2. Go into the west sector, wait to get caught, and force Vader into killing her. 3. Search the castle for a comm device that she could use to contact Sabe.

Option 2 it was. All she had to do was lose the droid.

"Does your Lord normally allow his... visitors... to take a bath?" Naberrie inquired, hoping to sound as casual as possible.

B2 let out a cackle.

"Visitors? I been servin' Lord Vader since he moved into this castle. You're his first visitor."

Naberrie stopped in her tracks, her entire body running cold as her face blanched. His *first* visitor?

Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, second in command to Emperor Palpatine, would not pick just any person to be his first visitor. He wouldn't choose a random scrub from the lower levels of Coruscant to execute in his personal castle. He certainly wouldn't primp her up with baths and personal chef droids.

But he might do that for Senator Amidala, former Queen of Naboo, author of the Treaty of the Two Thousand, who openly stood against the Chancellor and asked him to forgo his emergency powers.

He might do that for the wife of Anakin Skywalker, Palpatine's first choice for an apprentice. He might even prolong her suffering by bringing her to the site of her husband's death.

He might do that for a woman who died obviously pregnant, with very Force-powerful twins.

B2 whirled in front of her, her extremities fussing about with Naberrie's hair and clothes. "You feeling okay? You look like you just seen a ghost."

The droid looked down the hallway past Naberrie, before turning her head to check behind her. After seeing no one coming up either corridor, she leaned in conspiratorially. "Is it Lord Vader? I know he's got a reputation in the galaxy, but if I'm bein' honest, he's never given me or any of the other droids a problem. He's a little short with us, most of the time just plain ignores us, but he's never been cruel. I don't think he's as violent as they all say."

Naberrie had no clue how this droid, living all the way on Mustafar, had any clue what the galaxy at-large had to say about Darth Vader.

Unless...

"So there are communication devices here? Or maybe a way to watch the holonet?"

B2 and Naberrie remained locked in a battle of stares, neither wanting to be the first to look away and admit defeat. Finally B2 loudly proclaimed, "Well, would you look at that! Your room!"

The droid pressed a button to open the hatch door, revealing a small rectangular room, free of any decor or sign of a personality, with the only furniture being a tiny bed in the corner and a circular bedside table. Every inch of it was the same impersonal chrome of everything else Imperial.

Naberrie vaguely wondered if she was meant to get nicer chambers than this, and messed it all up when she started asking after comm devices.

"So, make yourself comfortable," B2 said from the doorway after Naberrie went into the room. She noted that there was no button for the hatch from inside. "Me or RJ'll stop by later, in case you need anything or want a bath. We'll have a device for you to contact us with. If you need the temperature or lighting changed, just let us know. Spat will be by later to take your dinner order."

After B2 locked Naberrie in her cell, she thought of everything Padme Amidala would be doing in this situation. She'd already have a plan in place — probably something involving pulling the household droids to her side, or pretending to need something so they'd open the door and she could run out. Naberrie fully intended to find a comm device and get a message out to Sabe.

She looked longingly at the bed in front of her. There was no bed in the Imperial prison cell. She flopped down, curling up with the blanket and pillow, assuring herself that she'd plot an escape worthy of Amidala.

Tomorrow.

Chapter 4

Days went by before Naberrie got so much as a glance outside of her door.

B2 came into her room three times a day with a meal ready, and Naberrie ate a few bites before going back to sleep. She didn't see a point in filling her stomach. Whatever scheme Darth Vader was hatching was going to come to a head eventually — why bother with food, if she was likely going to die soon anyway?

Her patience wore thin rather quickly waiting for the inevitable execution. What was *taking* him so long? She didn't see what else the Dark Lord could possibly be doing, when he very well knew he had a rebel prisoner in his home.

After giving him days to finally come and kill her, Naberrie grew tired of the charade. If he wouldn't do it already, she would leave this Force-forsaken cell, whether Darth Vader liked it or not.

With any luck, she'd only anger him further.

Her first day there, the server droid B2 gave her a comlink — one that contacted only the droid team. Naberrie never deigned to use the device, not wishing to appear as though she accepted her position as prisoner of this castle.

She palmed the small device and pressed the singular button in its center, sitting up straight on the chance it was a holographic comm. She unconsciously ran her hands through her hair, which hung around her face, totally unstyled and uncured. The returning beep came back in seconds, with no hologram.

"You need somethin', miss?" The motherly incantation of B2 sounded through the speaker, and Naberrie quickly clambered for something to say — anything to get that awful door to open.

"Can I get a tour of..." She paused before saying it and openly sighed. "*Fortress Vader?*"

B2 paused for a moment before replying, like she couldn't quite believe what she heard. That Naberrie actually wanted to get out of bed for a change. "A'course. I'm in the middle of somethin', but I'll send up RJ."

After shutting off her comlink, Naberrie stood and was suddenly very... *aware* of herself. She looked down at her threadbare tunic, ripped pants, and scuffed boots, all from her time in the Coruscant underbelly, and ran her fingers through her lanky hair. Senator — or Queen — Amidala would have never dreamed of going out into public like this. Nabooian gowns are more than simple fashion statements, they acted as weapons, or tools of disguise and concealment. With her elaborate headdresses and distinguished gowns, she could smuggle in weapons where no one else could. Before the rise of the Empire, she'd never gone out in public in only a single layer.

Though, she supposed, Fortress Vader wasn't exactly *the public*. It was a practically abandoned castle on a planet that by all accounts should be uninhabitable.

But it was still the closest she had come to socializing in over two years.

The door slid open, and for the first time Naberrie came face-to-face with B2's assistant, RJ. Another server droid, a smaller model with blue and green trim instead of B2's red and gold. The droid moved so quickly around the room he practically darted, and turned to look at Naberrie.

"Hello mistress. I am RJ-8T, but the rest of the staff calls me RJ."

Much more formal than his supervisor.

"I am Naberrie." She said simply, happy to hide her unwashed and unstyled self behind a pseudonym.

The droid gave a slight nod before heading for the doorway. "I will give you a tour of Fortress Vader, which will end just in time for supper in the dining room. Since you have still not provided us with your nourishment preferences, Spat will be preparing a randomly selected menu item."

"That is satisfactory," she said, surprised that they were so close to dinnertime. She stopped paying attention to minor details like time since arriving on Mustafar. What did it matter what time it was anyway? She didn't need to know what time Darth Vader selected to execute her.

The hatchway door to her cell slid shut behind her, leaving in the cold darkness of the corridor, the only light shining from RJ's portal as he whirred on ahead of her, moving faster than a droid had any business moving.

"RJ?" She called lightly, not wanting to startle the already worked up server droid.

RJ voraciously spun around. "What is it, mistress?"

"Um," she moved closer to the droid, not wishing for her request to echo off the walls of Fortress Vader, possibly garnering the attention of its namesake. "It's just.. I've been wearing these clothes for a really long time. They aren't even clean. And if we're going to be eating supper in a formal dining room..."

"You want a new wardrobe, mistress?" RJ asked with zero judgment in his tone, but Naberrie couldn't help feeling silly. Here she was, prisoner to the Emperor's mad dog, asking a server droid for new clothes. She had seen many prisoners in her life as Senator Amidala, and absolutely zero of them had ever asked for a new wardrobe. Even particularly diva inmates like Ziro the Hutt knew better than to ask for something like that.

"Not a *new* wardrobe," she defended. "Maybe something to wear so I can wash these clothes?"

She gestured to the stains lining her tunic, hoping the droid would take pity and provide her with a new wardrobe anyway.

The droid spoke slowly, as if carefully choosing his words. No droid she ever knew cared for tact, so there must be something... in his programming, something that he was ordered to keep secret. Something he was prevented from revealing.

"There are... no clothes here at Fortress Vader, mistress."

What?

"No clothes?" She asked, a bit dumbfounded. How could there be an entire castle, a so-called *Fortress*, and they don't have a stitch of clothing? "I know they probably wouldn't be my size or anything. I'm not asking for anything *fancy*, just something suitable to wear instead of these rags."

"I have just checked my inventory records to confirm, mistress, and I am correct. There are... no clothes here at Fortress Vader." He rushed out the last sentence and quickly turned.

Naberrie let out a mirthless laugh and took stock of the darkened, *clothesless* castle surrounding her.

Where in the galaxy am I?

RJ led her through corridor after corridor, each one looking ever more the same than the last, each one the same emotionless chrome that lined the walls of every Imperial ship. She wondered to herself if Chancellor — *Emperor* — Palpatine chose these dank and depressing walls, or if his team of traitor minions made these choices for him.

As Chancellor, Palpatine was a hands-on ruler. Was he still that way? Or did he sit up in his office on Coruscant, on *Imperial Center* in his husk of a Jedi Temple, and bask in the glory of his Empire?

She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Every hatchway door revealed rooms that looked similar to Naberrie's cell. Fortress Vader was a true castle in itself, with empty rooms and echoing halls. Whatever ghosts Darth Vader was harboring lurking around every corner.

He had enough space to run his own prison. A prison specifically for his personal enemies, enough tools to torture each of them however he delighted.

So why did he remain alone on a lava planet, filled with nothing but empty halls, a sparse droid team, and a traitor to the Empire?

Her bare feet slapped against the cold of the floor as Naberrie and RJ rounded the corner of their final corridor. On the left side, there was only a stanchioned off elevator, with a warning carved into its gray chrome doors.

West Sector. Keep Out.

She turned away from the imposing doors and looked into the room that sat to her right.

A long oak table stretched the length of the room, lit up by what must've been over a thousand pinpricks of light, each one shining brighter than the last. Naberrie reached her hand out to touch one and felt the soft fire burning. Candles. She hadn't seen a real candle in years. Everyone on Coruscant used artificial light.

Underneath the slow glow of the candles, which she now saw were hanging from fixtures coming down from the vaulted ceilings, sat garlands of purple flowers and greenery mixed in, all lining the table and chairs.

A singular chair sat at the head of the table, with two droids on either side, each one staring at her expectantly. B2 gestured to the open chair, and Naberrie moved cautiously inside the room, afraid to frighten away the tenuous beauty found in Fortress Vader.

"Spat's nearly done with your dinner," B2 informed her, gesturing for Naberrie to take a seat at the table. "He's so excited to be cookin' again. Lord Vader doesn't require meals in the traditional sense, and Spat's the best chef droid this side of the galaxy. He misses showin' off over at the Senate."

"Spat's from the Senate?" Naberrie jerked her head up, suddenly aware that despite the beauty, she was still in the castle of the second-in-command to Emperor Palpatine. That these ties aren't brand new, that Palpatine has been hatching his scheme for years now — years that he spent putting on a facade of caring about their home planet of Naboo. She likely knew every single person in his inner circle. There's a chance that he expected *her* to be in his inner circle after he manipulated Anakin.

"Yeah, Spat cooked for the Senator's for years. After the Republic fell, he was reassigned to Lord Vader. We all were. RJ here used to work in the Jedi Temple. FX-6 is from the medcenter. Lord Vader wanted experienced staff that didn't need much tendin'."

Roaring sounded behind her ears, as the ghost of Padme Amidala worked in the background of her mind, putting the pieces together. FX-6 used to work in the medcenter on Coruscant. He was also there when Vader was... made. B2 said that he's been with Vader all his life.

Darth Vader was from Coruscant.

She quickly ran through Palpatine's loyalists, anyone who was believed dead in the aftermath of the Republic, and came up short. Those who didn't agree with Palpatine were forced to pretend. For the sake of their families.

Nobody would choose to stalk around in a black mask for the glorification of a man like Sheev Palpatine.

Naberrie took a careful seat, training her face to not look too eager for information. "So Lord Vader hand picked each of you? Personally?"

"Lord Vader handpicked FX. Spat and RJ were assigned to him, and I'm from Mustafar."

She carefully looked at K5 and FX, sat side-by-side, neither saying a word. Neither had ever delivered her food or visited her cell, like B2, RJ, and Spat had. They only stared blankly from across the table, totally unresponsive.

Darth Vader's spies?

"So where did you work before, K5?" She asked lightly, feigning casual conversation. Hoping this little green droid wouldn't have the forethought of R2 to not answer any unwanted questions.

"K5 was built by the Dark Lord himself," B2 interjected. Before she could press the point, Spat came into the room balancing a large serving platter, decked out with eight different plates, all topped with various entrees, side dishes, appetizers, and desserts.

"Is this..." She didn't want to sound presumptuous, but she was the only organic being in the room. "Is this *all* for me?"

She hoped they didn't notice the unspoken question lingering there: *Is Darth Vader going to join us?*

She could only imagine eating a meal with him. She didn't even know if he *could* eat. If he was a human, he must eat. But that didn't mean she wished to be privy to how that happened.

"Well a'course," B2 said. "And don't think about saying no. If you can't finish, Spat will save some for later. The Dark Lord himself insists."

Naberrie scoffed. Of course Darth Vader would insist on her eating. He couldn't invent new ways to torture her if she starved herself.

After Spat finished filling her plate, and as the droids beeped amongst themselves, she cut in. "So, K5." The little droid was the only one shrouded in mystery; the one that B2 never offered any information on. "Have you ever left Mustafar?"

The droid perked up at the question, beeping and gesticulating wildly, while his domed head spun around. B2 translated, "K5 gets to go on special missions with the Dark Lord. He was made here, but he's the only one who gets to leave the planet."

Naberrie smiled while the droids translated, but she kept her eye on the rambunctious little astromech. On his left cartridge, she noticed something... An unattached jack.

The kind that R2 used to open up doors and hack into systems.

She kept nodding, training her eyes to look away from the loose jack, lest B2, or worse, FX-6 noticed and repaired the issue. She looked around the dining hall, searching for any distraction, anything that would garner the attention of five different droids. She spotted the leftover food sitting on the counter that led to the kitchen.

Smiling her old politician's smile, Naberrie kept the conversation going while eating her food, asking the droids appropriate questions and displaying genuine interest in their lives.

Any information they had to provide her could be used; as an escape, or as a way to goad Vader. Or she could deduce who he really was — send the information to Sabe, and finally die in peace.

When her stomach nearly filled with the variety of foods that Spat prepared, she slowly came to her feet.

"I would love some more before I lay down for bed," She said carefully, lying through her teeth as her stomach felt near to exploding. Spat came to attention and she held up a hand. "Please, let me. You've all been so kind."

"I'd even say you all deserved a long oil bath."

B2 let out an annoyed guffaw, while Naberrie crept behind her and K5.

"Yeah, like *that*'s gonna happen any time soon. Those are exclusively for K5 and FX."

The other droids beeped and warbled in response, Spat even flailing his tong arms, while FX-6 hovered angrily over the table.

They were all so busy sniping at each other that they didn't notice her slip of the hand.

After eating a couple bites of her second helping with no notice or acknowledgement from the droids, Naberrie left them to their own devices before creeping out of the kitchen, suddenly thankful for her bare feet that didn't make a sound as they padded across the hall, to the imposing black doors before her.

West Sector. Keep Out.

Darth Vader, a man from Coruscant, a man who was created by FX-6 not long before, and was immediately moved to Mustafar. Everything he didn't want her to know was behind those doors.

Discreetly pulling out the jack she stole off of K5, Naberrie opened the door within seconds and quickly ensconced herself inside.

A black beam went down the length of the hallway, a long drop on either side that looked to last forever, red smoke filling the shoulders of the corridor, keeping her directly in place. She stayed glued to her spot in the entryway, her shoulders trembling and lip quivering.

What am I doing here?

She whipped around and found the hatchway door firmly closed, no outlet in sight that would fit with her jack.

The sound of her light breathing echoed off the walls as she made her way across the beam, waiting for the next hatchway door to open for her. She quickly moved down the corridor, the beam neverending, and the pathway leading to what felt like nowhere. When the walkway finally ended, she took a sharp right turn and her gasp reverberated off the barren walls of Fortress Vader.

A large window opened up the length of the corridor, the cool grays and blues from the night sky of Mustafar shining down and lighting up the black floors of the castle. The lava that flowed from the moats pooled at the bottom, cutting the planet in half with its burst of orange, like a lightsaber bisecting the world in two.

Vader had told her there was not much to look at, but... The sky of oncoming dusk, the greenery and flowers, the pool of lava lighting up the world... The beauty of Mustafar was hidden beneath raging fires and ghosts of the past.

She stayed motionless in her spot, allowing the unstable beauty of the planet to wrap her in itself. She couldn't have said how long she stood there, absorbing the small bit of peace that she found in the galaxy, but she stayed until she heard it.

Faintly, so quiet that it was almost imperceptible, was the sliding of a hatchway door, and a firm *shhh* close. She quickly crept to the corner of the walkway and pressed her ear to the wall, to no avail. No sound of footsteps echoed off the floors. No movement, certainly no modulated breathing of Darth Vader.

She fiddled with the jack in her hand, stolen off the little astromech droid. It was likely K5, looking for his stolen property. She turned and made her way past the large window, refusing to turn her head and get sucked into the sights of the lava planet again.

Like everything else Imperial, every walkway and corridor looked exactly the same, and Naberrie couldn't be sure if she'd even moved farther along in the West Sector, or if she was just walking the same hallways over and over again.

When she turned a corner, she ended up in the open doorway of a seemingly empty room. She felt along the walls for a light control, and found none. Walking deeper into the room, she was just barely able to make out a shape.

A shape of a communications console.

She sucked in her breath and quickly whipped around with a hand up, as if expecting that this were an elaborate ruse orchestrated by Vader himself.

The jack felt heavy in her hand as she shoved it into the console and watched it light up. No passcode. No barrier. Just a screen that asked her to input the number to the comm she was contacting.

Knowing full-well that it could be a trap, she weighed the risks. All she wanted was for Vader to just execute her already, and it had been days since she heard from him. He might not even *be* in the castle for all she knew. Whatever her punishment, Vader was playing a long game, and she wanted no part of it.

Before she could think too deeply about it, she punched in the code to reach her old friend.

After only a couple of beats, the face of Sabe visualized in front of her.

“Padme?!“ Sabe sprang to her feet and moved closer, her hologram growing larger. “Where are you?! Bail contacted Mon yesterday, and he said someone pretending to be Padme Amidala was captured!“

Naberrie only nodded in reply, suddenly not knowing what to tell her old friend. Could she really put her life in danger? Send her to Mustafar?

“Well what’s happened? Where are you? Bail will be back today, we can come and *get* you —”

Naberrie heard a clatter and whipped around as one of the many arms of FX-6 whirred past the corner of her eye. She flattened herself against the wall and poked her head softly around the corner. She drew back to find Sabe staring at her questioningly.

“Sabe, I need to go. I just wanted you to know that I’m alive.”

“Padme, no, WAIT —”

Naberrie closed the console down and quickly removed the jack, chiding herself for ever contacting Sabe. For ever even *considering* bringing her old friends here. She knew the consequences when she went to rescue Bail. Now she had to live with them.

She crept out of the room and crossed to the opposite corridor, both looking for a way out of the maze that was the West Sector, and trying to get a look at FX-6; to ensure that he wasn’t there looking for her.

The menacing droid stood in front of a seemingly blank wall and tapped on it with one of its many limbs before moving back. She watched as the wall slowly slid open, plumes of

white smoke filtering out and into the corridor. When the wall was all the way open, FX-6 spun his visual receptors around. Naberrie sucked in her breath and her heart steadily beat inside the walls of her chest as she bit her lip in anticipation. If FX-6 found her, he'd for sure tell his Master that she was in the forbidden sector of the castle. He might find the console and see that it was used only moments before.

Maybe Vader would finally get on with his execution if he found out about the console and the West Sector.

When FX turned his photoreceptors into the hidden room, Naberrie quietly rushed across the corridor to face the entrance. She peaked around FX, and could barely make out what was behind the door for all the smoke. She took steps closer, careful to not make a move to startle the medical droid. Quietly moving into the secret room, and she realized that the smoke was not smoke at all — it was white and cloudy, somehow turning her mouth both wet and dry at the same time. When the fog somewhat dissipated, she saw what was behind it.

A bacta tank.

An empty bacta tank, totally drained, with only the remaining fog acting as a shield between herself and the loyal medical droid, the creator of Darth Vader, who was now behind the tank, pressing buttons and moving with a sense of urgency.

She quietly sidestepped around the tank until her back hit the hard wall. She stifled a whimper to avoid the watchful eyes of FX-6, her heart beating so thrillingly fast that a wicked smile curled on her lips.

Her chest heaved up and down as she fought to keep her breaths quiet with her rapidly beating heart, when she saw it. Only a few steps away from her, a sleek black chamber in the shape of an egg, with a crack around the mid-perimeter, holding the cell closed. Behind the egg sat another hatchway door, with yet another warning.

Intruders at risk.

Within the forbidden West Sector of Fortress Vader, in a room that could only be described as foreboding, sat a bacta tank, an egg, and another even more secret door.

Whatever Vader was hiding from the world was behind that door.

All she had to do was get past the egg.

She skirted around FX-6 until she was directly behind the egg, its sleek curvature exuding a kind of oncoming terror. Like the galaxy did not want that egg to crack.

Her breath hitched and the thrill of being caught in the West Sector hitched along with it. What was she *doing*? She just contacted Sabe, who might have been able to trace the signal. If Sabe, Bail, and Mon came storming Fortress Vader for *no reason*, cause she already got herself executed...

Bail was likely already fighting to stay alive. He might've gone into hiding. The last thing she needed — no, the last thing the *galaxy* needed — was for Mon Mothma to also be forced underground.

With a final, wistful look at the mysterious door, Naberrie took a step away, when a bright light blinded her.

The egg cracked open, lighting up the entire room with its crisp white, surely giving away her presence to FX-6. The only color that came from the egg was that of a hairless head, skin red and raw, with scars slicing in every direction, every bit of humanity stripped off until nothing was left but hot searing pain.

The freshly cleaned black helmet lowered over the scarred head and latched onto the mouthpiece, forming the facade of Darth Vader. As the helmet was locked into place over his scarred head, the heavy modulated breathing came back, its cadence like the soundtrack to her own demise. She took quiet steps toward the door, keeping her back flush against the wall and her arms and legs tucked into her body, hoping that the less room she took up, the less chance she stood of being noticed.

As Vader stood to his full height, the egg moved with him, and its cracked top now towered over the room, giving way to more light and more visibility. The fog wasn't even enough to cover her now.

FX-6 pointed his photoreceptors right at her, and his head spun, sending out a blaring alarm, like he was trying to alert all of Mustafar.

Vader's neck tensed and his shoulders twitched, as if fighting back the turbulent storm raging within. He slowly turned his head, and his unfeeling black eyes met Naberrie's, pinning her in place.

"What," his voice came out husky and harsh, like it would be a snarl if he wasn't covered by that awful helmet. "Are you doing here?"

Naberrie sucked in a deep breath, her hands along the walls behind her, fiddling with the jack stolen off of K5, looking for any place to open that hatch door. "I —

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO COME BACK HERE!" Darth Vader roared so loudly that the air seemed to gather around him, his very wrath pushing against her as he slowly descended from the egg, his stomps growing stronger with every step.

"It was an accident." She quickly rushed out, sounding pathetic to even her own ears, her hands finally connecting the jack to the wall, trying to find any words to hold him off long enough for her to escape. "I was leaving dinner and didn't know the way back to my room."

FX-6 shook and waved his arms around, beeping words that Naberrie didn't understand while shaking his arms in her direction. Tattling on her. Maybe even trying to get her killed, while Darth Vader listened intently. The moment he turned from her to watch his medical droid gesticulate around the room...

Naberrie inserted the jack into the wall and bolted from the room before the door opened all the way..

All light emanating from the walls and ceiling was snuffed out, and Naberrie could barely see in front of her; she only allowed her feet to carry her where they would, not giving her brain a moment to comprehend or plan. Just her feet, carrying her away from the egg, the bacta tank, and the cold fog of Vader's personal quarters.

She dared only one look behind her, and found deep empty blackness. She could not see Vader, but she could hear that steadied breathing coming closer, the Dark Lord not even deigning to run after his prisoner.

He didn't *need* to run. He knew that he was stronger and faster, that Naberrie had no plausible escape route, that there was no distance she could run, no decibel at which she could scream.

That on the entire planet, there was no one except the two of them, and never ending pools of lava.

No...

She stopped completely and remembered: the blue-gray sky, the side of the planet that wasn't covered in raging fires. The glass window that she admired.

Without fully contemplating the implications of her plan, Naberrie took a sharp turn down the next corridor and found the window. She ran her hands up and down the panes of glass, looking for some kind of opening, some kind of latch, a place where she could use the jack she took from K5. Of course there wasn't one — Darth Vader wasn't one to make escape easy.

With the closely approaching footsteps, Naberrie realized she was out of time and options. She backed up against the far wall, and took a deep breath, in and out, three times. Three breaths to settle herself. Three breaths of fear. That was all she allowed.

Vader turned the hall, his hands nowhere near his weapons, and stood only steps away. He made no move to apprehend her.

He thinks me weak and pathetic. He thinks he's won and I'll go with him willingly.

"What do you think you're doing?" His reprimand would've almost been obvious exasperation, rather than cold wrath, if not for the heavy modulation. "There's nowhere to run." He gestured to the window and stared at her expectantly.

Naberrie turned and her eyes met with his black orbs. She only shook her head.

Before Vader could react, she ran full speed into the glass window, smashing it into millions of bits of shimmering light and fell to the pit of Mustafar.

Chapter 5

The world stopped around her. She cleared her mind of the past two years, of the Empire, of her never-ending heartbreak, and as she plummeted to her demise, she thought only of her family. Of little Luke and Leia, and the people she loved who watched over them. Of Anakin, standing on the balcony smiling back at her. Of the japor snippet given to her by a little boy from Tatooine. Of Mon Mothma, and Bail Organa, and Sabe. While she fell, she let herself be back in those places. She would die a wife. A mother. A Senator. She would die at peace.

Her heart lifted as relief washed over her. She'd never be hungry again, she'd never have to go back to Coruscant, or be locked in a white room, she'd never have to *mourn* again, she could just *be* and be one with the Force. Maybe she'd even see him again.

The sweet relief only lasted a moment as the world stopped around her, and she thought to herself that death might not be so bad.

She snapped out of her reverie when air swished softly behind her ears, and she opened her eyes, and saw the glass from the broken window hovering beside her, little drops of red liquid floating next to it. She reached out her hand to touch it when she found she was stricken still, she couldn't move, she could barely *breathe*, she only hung suspended in the air above Mustafar.

Her eyes flitted up to the window she destroyed, and in its open air stood Darth Vader, his hand held out as he left her, the glass, and what she now realized was droplets of blood, hanging in the air.

That miserable *nerf* wouldn't even let her die.

She thrashed against the invisible restraints, practically willing him to drop her, when she was slowly lowered to the ground. Vader dropped the glass and it went shattering in a million more pieces, keeping her held aloft. The blood she lost hung morbidly in the air beside her, and she had to turn her head before she lost her dinner.

That would probably float in the air beside her too.

She could move again as he slowly guided her down, and with that came the searing pain of a thousand cuts that lined her entire body. The blood still flowed out of her, and her upper arms turned a dark red, coating through the sleeves of her tunic, and her feet twitched as she felt the blood rushing between her toes, and Force help her, if she could only ignore the metallic tang of blood on her lips, the dried blood that coated her cheeks.

Why would Vader force her to *live* through this? Did she not have the right to decide where and when she died? Who in the galaxy did he think he *was*?

Vader let her out of his grasp when she was a foot from the ground. When she was out of the restraint of the Force, her bare bloodied feet fell gently to the stone beneath, and she crouched down to touch the black onyx, and felt its heat rising from the lava surrounding her.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Darth Vader staring at her from the window, his head slowly shaking, like she was being reprimanded.

This changes nothing. He didn't get to take the power of a choice away from her. The power of the Force doesn't mean he had power over *her*.

She ripped a piece from the bottom of her tunic, her eyes never leaving the smashed window. Vader disappeared from view for a moment, and Naberrie knew what was coming next. She'd seen Jedi in action enough times to know exactly what came next.

She took the largest shard of glass from the ground and wrapped it in the piece of cloth, averting her eyes from the blood soaking her hands and seeping into the weaves of the fabric. It grew hot and sticky with her blood, and she only grasped tighter, paying no heed to the possibility of another scar.

The onyx beneath Vader's castle stretched far back and she went all the way to the edge with her weapon at the ready, ignoring the pool of lava that licked at her feet, the heat threatening to pull her under. This was where he would finally do it. She stood no chance against him and his lightsaber. He would either impale her or throw her into the lava.

Vader came to the lip of the window and whipped his head around to stare down at her, like the eyes underneath that lifeless helmet were piercing to the ground below.

But not at her. At something...

Something moved behind her. Naberrie slowly turned her head, and she jumped back as shining red eyes met her own.

A creature with a hard black exoskeleton stared back at her, but it didn't lunge or attack. It stood on its six legs and ducked its head, so its curved beak nearly touched the hot stone underneath.

She took deep breaths, and the air behind her whooshed as Darth Vader jumped from his vantage point above, not even stopping to roll or balance himself. The black stone beneath rumbled as he landed, and he immediately stomped toward her, his crimson lightsaber at the ready, still not deigning to actually run after her.

The six-legged creature still only stared back at her with its head bowed, waiting for her to decide. It did not attack and it did not shy away from the figure of Darth Vader or his lightsaber.

She lifted a gentle hand to the creature's head and felt the hard casing in which it sheathed itself, running her hand down its smooth exterior, and it remained docile. Understanding. Patient.

Everything Darth Vader was not.

She turned to give Vader one final withering stare before hopping on the creature. With nowhere to place her hands, she allowed herself to slip and slide around the exoskeleton, before tapping her feet against its sides, internally begging it to get moving as Vader finally picked up his pace to reach them.

The creature took off over the dark stone and pools of lava, and Naberrie only let out a wild laugh as she twisted and turned, no saddle in which she could remain still, and nothing

on the creatures head for her to grab onto, all she had was her own will and the care of this wild Mustafarian creature, a species which she couldn't even name.

They ran over the few stone walkways of the planet, past glowing fields of fire, around to the front of the castle. She dared only one look back and saw the flowing orange moats running up Fortress Vader, with no sign of it's namesake — her captor.

Part of her wondered where the Dark Lord ran off to; he wasn't the type to allow a prisoner, who just flagrantly disregarded his rules, to escape from his clutches. She tapped the creature's sides two more times, hoping to signal it to go faster.

It bucked beneath her and dashed even faster than she anticipated, and Naberrie grasped stupidly for anything to hold onto. After a few minutes of running, Fortress Vader was barely a speck in the distance, and the lava grew stronger around them, sweat falling down her face and the heaviness of the heat taking weight over her chest even as her hair whipped in a frenzy behind her.

She had no clue where the creature was taking her — she had no clue how to direct it. If she did know how to direct it, she wouldn't know where to go. There likely weren't many places to go on Mustafar. How long would it take to find a civilization? To find a ship? To find something to eat, or a place to sleep?

Suddenly, leaving Fortress Vader seemed like the stupidest thing she'd done since going on a rescue mission for Bail.

The only thing more stupid than leaving, of course, would be going back.

With the castle so far beyond, she made to gently rub the creature's head, soothing it to a normal pace. A pace that wouldn't send her flying into a lava field.

Before she could so much as graze her hand over the exoskeleton, they were cut off.

By another one of its species, taller and with more girth, with glowing red eyes somehow more piercing, and a threatening sneer over it's lips. In a saddle sat Darth Vader, his lightsaber ignited and ready.

Before Naberrie could so much as throw him a scathing retort, the abrupt stop sent her flying over the edge.

Her heart lifted in her chest when the realization washed over her. *This is it. This is how I die. After all this time, my body will burn to ash. I'll be spread out over the fields of Mustafar.*

Like my husband.

She closed her eyes for the second time and let fate take her where it would.

Fate slammed her into hard and scaly skin and when she opened her eyes, all she saw were slimy teeth, inches away from her face. She lunged back, falling into the hard metal and stone beneath her, when she saw she was trapped.

She was surrounded, stuck on a scrap of metal in an ocean of lava. And hovering above her, was the mean snarl of an entirely different creature — not a creature, an actual *beast*.

It's yellow eyes sunk deep into its face, while its teeth snarled at her and it's hooked claws cut deep into the metal, flanking her. The ferocity with which it stuck its teeth out almost made it seem like a smile. It moved away from her face and its nose twitched in anticipation — likely smelling the blood that still flowed out of her body, all the while she silently cursed herself for ever breaking that glass, for ever thinking it would be smart to run away from Darth Vader into the wilds of a lava planet — did anyone ever have a peaceful death on Mustafar? Was peace something so out of the realm of possibility for this planet, that even the ravaging fires licking at her flesh would've been too hopeful?

In her hand, still wrapped in the threadbare fabric of her tunic, she still held a small piece of broken glass. Glass she meant to use on Darth Vader. She held on tight, ignoring the cut that grew deeper into her palm, and with all her reserved strength, slammed the broken shard in the beast's belly.

The glass barely punctured it's skin. The beast, so intent on making her it's next meal, didn't even notice the tiny drop of blood. The drop of blood that took every bit of effort stored inside of her.

She made to scramble away and was stopped by another hooked claw. The heavily veined feet sat threateningly beside her, each one the length of her entire torso, holding her in on both sides, squeezing more and more until escape was no longer an option. The thing licked its yellowed teeth and smiled down at her, going in for it's first bite.

With her heart pounding so hard she was sure the beast was relishing in her fear, and tears now flowing down her face as she faced her final moments, her undignified death, she again grasped the glass shard so tightly that it drew new pools of blood into her palm. The ghost of Padme Amidala coursed through her, and she slammed the shard into the raised vein of it's foot.

The beast let out a roar as it's blood splattered all over her face, mixing in with her own, and she rolled out of it's grasp and finally came to her feet.

As she gained her footing, the beast's tail, a long wicked tail shaped like a trident, whipped around from behind and smashed into her face, sending her sailing off of the metal scrap and over the lava.

She fell on a burning sand field, and before the lava could sear her skin, she was picked up by black gloves, the cybernetic limbs almost gently caressing her as he stood her back on her feet and off the burning field.

Across the lava the beast still stood, roaring, with a single bit of glass sticking out of it's foot as it stared directly into her eyes.

Naberrie, taken over by righteous anger, whipped around at Vader.

"This is all *your* fault!" She screamed over the roars.

Darth Vader paused and twisted his head, like he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. He looked down at her with an aghast, "Excuse me?"

She didn't take a moment to care if she offended him, even if the offense would lead to him simply feeding her to the beast. "You heard me! I was *getting away*. If you didn't cut me off, I wouldn't have gone flying over the lava, into its clutches!"

Vader let out what might've been an exasperated scoff.

“You jumped out of a window!”

“So it’s my fault you chased me out of the castle?!!”

“It’s your fault you jumped out of a window!”

Before she could throw back a retort, the beast reared back on its hind legs and hopped over the lava, now standing only feet away from them.

Darth Vader shot out an arm and sent her careening back, until she was slammed against a pillar. With his one hand still held out to hold her in place, the other hand again ignited his lightsaber and slashed at the beast.

Using one of its clawed feet, the beast dodged the lightsaber and ripped against the black suit, both blood and sparking wire exploding out of the crook of Vader’s arm as he let out a strangled gasp, his lightsaber falling limp in his hand. He turned to look back at her, with his one hand still held out to hold her in place, while she struggled against her restraints. The beast wasted no time and went for another attack, this time sending the lightsaber out of Vader’s hand.

The invisible barrier around her dropped, and Naberrie fell to the ground in a heap. Vader was backing away from the beast with one hand held out — to calm or as an attempt at using the Force as a weapon, Naberrie couldn’t have said. All she knew was that in that moment, with blood running down his suit, Darth Vader was totally human, and totally vulnerable to the whims of whatever that thing was.

She ran onto the field, jumping from one foot to the other to avoid the pits of lava surrounding them and lifted the lightsaber.

Padme Amidala had held a lightsaber before. This one felt even heavier in her hand, like the tendrils of darkness that surrounded it held actual weight in the physical world. She looked to Vader, who was barely holding off the roaring beast, its teeth barred only inches away from that black helmet. Threatening to rip it off at any moment. She could feel the anxiety, the panic that emanated from Darth Vader.

She screamed and his head whipped around, all attention averted from the beast that threatened him. When her eyes locked onto the black orbs of his helmet, she whipped the lightsaber across the field and into his black gloved hands.

Vader caught the weapon right as the beast used the horns on its head to charge, and he dodged out of the way just in time, sending the beast’s head into the lava sand. In the millisecond the beast’s head was down, Vader whipped his saber around and took off its head with one thrust.

The beast died with a pathetic whimper.

Naberrie stared as its yellow eyes shut for the last time, and her heart lurched into her throat.

This creature’s death was on *her* hands. Not even Darth Vader’s — her own. It lived on Mustafar. She was only a visitor, and she went onto its planet. She was as careless with its life as she was with her own.

She let out a long-stifled cry as she covered her mouth with her hands, never allowing herself the peace of looking away.

Darth Vader turned off the glowing red saber and looked back at her as she cried. He took slow steps toward her and stopped only feet away, his width blocking her view of the dead beast. His black suit was ripped open and she saw only more scarred flesh underneath, most of it healed, but now a big gaping wound sat atop those, the blood of Darth Vader pouring out and onto the ground below.

“You’re bleeding,” she whispered, no longer allowing herself to cry with Darth Vader standing there.

He only gestured to her in response, and she looked down at her own battered and bloodied body and let out a laugh. Whether it was genuine or hysterical, she couldn’t have said.

Vader only stared at her while she laughed, and when she was finished he said, “I told you not to go in the West Sector, and I told you not to go outside. Those were the only rules.”

“If you’re going to execute me, please just do it here.” She looked around at the perpetually burning planet, exhaustion swarming over her entire body. “I can’t walk back to that castle.”

Vader lifted a hand, two fingers moving up and down in a hand signal before he turned his full attention on her.

“I’m not going to execute you.”

He unhooked his long black cape and held it out to her. An offering. She only stared at his outstretched hand.

“So I’m not going to be executed? I’m not in trouble for breaking all the rules of Fortress Vader?”

“No.”

He kept his cape expectantly out, and she gingerly took it, ignoring the feel of their hands grazing as he passed it over. She wrapped the cape around herself, finally covered by something other than the horrible pants and tunic she’d worn for so long.

Behind Vader came up the red-eyed creature, the one he rode, fitted with a saddle.

Naberrie didn’t fight when Darth Vader lifted her up and placed her gently on the saddle. She didn’t fight when he stayed behind her the entire ride back to Fortress Vader, and she didn’t fight it when he brought her back to her room, and left her there with his cape still laying over her.

Chapter 6

Fortress Vader had its own medical center.

Not the one she had already seen, sequestered away in the West Sector behind secret doors and an imposing “Enter at Your Own Risk” sign. This one was right off the main entrance, with unflattering bright lights, sterile tables, and a bacta tank.

The morning after her jaunt through Mustafar, Naberrie woke to find a disapproving B2 standing over her bed, puttering about the room, telling her that the Dark Lord expected her in the bacta tank within ten minutes. After a long night’s rest, she jumped to her feet at the chance to see the West Sector again — maybe even to get a peek inside the secret room.

Her disappointment when she was brought to a common medical center, across the castle from the West Sector, was palpable. B2 and RJ left her alone to wallow in her own misery, before she was lowered into the bacta.

When she was raised up, she was left alone with only FX-6. He threw her a robe when she got out, and stopped her when she tried to leave the room.

“What, am I supposed to stay in here all day?” She whined, knowing that she sounded petulant and not having the energy to care. “I just want to go back to sleep.”

FX promptly ignored her complaints and went straight to work at his station, his tall form blocking whatever he was putting together. After what felt like hours, he finally lifted up a small white box and slid over to Naberrie.

Without any ceremony or bedside manner, FX hastily grabbed for her scarred arms without asking permission. She snatched them back.

“Excuse me,” She used her best Padme Amidala voice. “What are you doing? You can’t just grab me.”

The droid only stared blankly back at her for a few moments before reaching for her arms again.

“No!” She shouted. She didn’t care that he was only doing his job. She got in the bacta tank — what more did he want from her? Being operated on by a strange droid that built Darth Vader did not sound like her idea of a good time.

FX-6 pushed back and forth, letting out aggravated beeps and warbles, while attempting to grab at her arms again. She hopped to her feet and ran for the doorway, clothes that weren’t a robe be damned, when she slid to a stop.

Darth Vader stood leaning against the doorway, watching every interaction between Naberrie and the droid. She had no clue how long he had been there. A red flush crept up her cheeks and to the tips of her ears while she scowled away from him.

“Looking for another window?”

She scoffed, but didn't respond. The way he casually stood against the doorway, the almost playful tone emanating through that awful modulator. If she didn't know better, she'd say he was... being funny.

Before she could say anything, FX-6 weasled his way in between them and started throwing his many extremities into the air, gesticulating back at her and around the room. No doubt airing all his grievances to his master. FX-6 probably would have preferred Vader let that beast tear her limb from limb.

Vader crossed his arms over his chest while the droid droned on, before finally holding up a hand.

"Leave us."

Naberrie knew he wasn't talking to her.

With what might have been a huff, FX-6 went for his medpack that he attempted to use earlier.

"Leave it." The Dark Lord commanded, his tone nearing the edge of his very limited patience. With that, the droid left the room in a hurry.

Vader closed the gap between them, and Naberrie stared up at his black helmet, hoping to get some glimpse of the man underneath. For the first time since arriving at the castle, she felt no fear standing in front of him. Darth Vader wasn't born this way. A silhouette of evil followed him at all times, but it wasn't his own. He was manufactured in a lab. She saw the human beneath, the flesh grafted to the machine.

It reminded her of her husband.

He once told her of the battle of the Citadel, where the Separatists used a powerful magnet to rip the blasters out of the clones hands and the lightsabers out of the Jedi's hands. Anakin and his arm went up with all the weapons. Was electrocuted with all the weapons.

She shuddered to think of the pain, the pain that her husband would have pretended he didn't feel for the sake of someone else. She shuddered even more to think of the insidious metaphor of it all, that Anakin was nothing more to any of them than the weapons they carried. To the Jedi. To Palpatine.

A shadow passed over her face, and Darth Vader whispered, "You're angry."

She shot him a scowl and returned to her seat. "Don't think you know how I feel."

Vader paused before taking the stool in front of her. His legs stretched long enough to extend past her chair, and she was officially within his space. She expected him to smell mechanical, like a hospital or a pile of machinery, but he didn't.

He smelled just like a man. Like every other human in the galaxy.

The box sat open beside him, and he removed a small white pad. He held it out expectantly, saying nothing. As if he'd wait there all day.

She took a deep breath and held out her arm.

A sharp breath escaped her lungs as he gently pressed the pad against the scars lining her arms, his fingers gently caressing as the pad burned away at her skin.

"This is a bacta pad. If you use it everyday," He upturned his head from her arm, as if implying that he believed she would do no such thing. "It should mostly heal. But..."

"You'll have these scars forever."

His cadence was normally calm and precise; he measured every word before using it. This sentence he rushed out, like he took no joy in saying it.

"Well, lucky for me, forever probably isn't that long anyway."

Before the last word was out, Vader snatched his hand away from her arm, and dropped the bacta pad in the box. His black-gloved hands gripped the box until he shook, and he finally stood and hurled the kit across the room and into the farthest wall.

Naberrie ducked instinctively, and peered up at her captor, who now stomped around the room, his frustration huffing quietly through the mask. She didn't flinch as he slammed his own medical supplies around the room.

"How many times do I have to tell you?!" He snapped, any pretense of a polite conversation gone. Naberrie sat up a little straight, chin up, refusing to be reprimanded by this man, as he continued throwing his own supplies against the far wall, growing a little harder with each word. "You are NOT here to be executed!"

The tiny bits of desperation seeped through the very edges of his heavy voice, and he gestured around the room, finally falling against the counter. "I don't know what to do." He whispered.

The pathetic admission was followed by Vader simply turning around, refusing to catch her eye while he admitted his own defeat. "B2 tells me when you try to refuse meals. I stood and watched you jump out one of the highest windows in the castle. You are trying to kill yourself and blame it on me."

The truth of his words slapped her like a ship coming out of lightspeed.

Of course he was right; She was so intent on him executing her that when he didn't, she tried to take matters into her own hands. But she didn't realize...

"I didn't think you even cared." He let out an almost indecipherable *pfft*, full of all the sass and attitude of her old friend Obi-Wan. "Aren't you a Sith Lo—"

He cut her off. "I can still care."

The silence hung heavy between them, and Naberrie looked desperately around the room, at her bacta pads strewn across the floor, at the kit that was together for her. At the man who stood at the counter, his scars similar to her own, and she felt the weight of his words. She had treated Darth Vader like he was not human — like he was an animal, a machine. Like he didn't feel. Why? Because he was a cyborg? A Sith Lord? Cause he lived on such an awful planet?

She took slow and soundless steps before standing right beside him at the counter. He stood over a foot taller than her, and she had to tilt her head up all the way to look at him, and

only hope that he could see her through that mask.

"You're right. I did—" Though she couldn't see them, she could feel his eyes piercing into hers, and she quickly looked down to the table before continuing. "I do want to die. That is why I jumped out the window. I think that's why I went into the West Sector in the first place. To force you.

"But," She continued. "You brought me here, no explanation, locked me in a white room, and never spoke to me again. I thought you were going to torture information out of me, or were waiting to execute me in some heinous way. All I know about you is that you're loyal to... to *that man*." She couldn't bring herself to say Palpatine's name aloud. His very presence in her mind made her throat close up.

She wrapped the robe tighter around herself. The weight in her chest lifted only slightly, but was replaced with something resembling... embarrassment. Vulnerability.

Vulnerable was never what she'd expected to be around Darth Vader.

She moved back to her seat, picking up stray bacta pads along the way. "I never did thank you, though. For saving me from that..."

"Roggwart." He supplied.

Roggwart. Not a species she'd ever encountered before, thankfully. "Yes. Thank you for saving me from the roggwart. Not that I'd ever admit it, but that thing was a bit beyond me."

Vader returned to the stool and took one of the bacta pads from her outstretched hand, his fingertips barely grazing her open palm. "I did warn you not to go outside."

Before she could stop herself, she actually laughed. She held out her scarred arm again, and let him gently wipe the pad over it. "I tend to do whatever I want."

"I know," He grumbled, and she looked up at him, a question forming on her lips. "I've learned."

Her arm lay over Vader's open palm, and she felt no fear at the contact, at being literally within his grasp. Like an overwhelming instinct that it was safe. He swiped over a particularly raw scar and the stinging pain burned on her arm so sharply that she let out a hiss and involuntarily snatched her arm back up. Vader made no move to force it back down.

"I'm sorry," He said quietly, still holding his hand out. Like he'd keep it there until she was ready. "It hurts."

She put her arm back down, determined to not react to the sting again.

"Does it still hurt you?" She whispered, careful to not break the tenuous trust between them. To not remind him that she saw his own scars.

"Yes."

They sat in silence while Vader carefully cleaned each of her scars, moving one by one, all the way up each arm until he was satisfied. Naberrie did not hurry him along.

“Come closer, my child,” The low croak of the Emperor’s voice carried throughout the hall, and with a careful look at the red guards, Barriss Offee took a few small steps toward the imposing throne.

After taking the steps, careful to not move too close, Barriss knelt down in front of her Emperor and bowed her head, awaiting further instruction.

“You have come with...” Emperor Palpatine sniffed the air and let out a low hiss. “Information.”

“Information and a proposal.” Barriss’s strong yet prim voice matched the strength of Palpatine’s. “Information on rebel activity. And a proposal on how to stop it.”

Though the arrogance didn’t show on her face, inwardly she possessed a wicked smile.

While Emperor Palpatine and his little pet Vader had been busying themselves with fool’s errands, she, Barriss Offee, made actual progress. She saw the little Senator, the believed-dead Padme Amidala walking the lower levels, and followed her all the way to her old apartment. Padme Amidala, who died pregnant with Anakin Skywalker’s child, something else only a fool couldn’t puzzle together. She was *surrounded* by witless parasites.

So she worked her way into the inner circle; pretended to be a friend to the Rebellion, and to Sabe. Gained their trust, called herself the Contact, fed them information only she wanted them to have. Until finally putting the last pawns of her plan into place, by sending Bail Organa to Daltarra to get captured, and getting little Padme kicked out of her apartment on the same day. Leading all the way up to when Sabe came with a coded transmission, asking her to trace it. The poor girl was so worried, and Barriss played the situation exactly as she had dreamed for the past two years.

Everyone, from Bail to Sabe, from Vader to Padme, played right into her hands.

“And you believe I should trust you? A cast-out from the Jedi Order?” Palpatine spit out the words.

She gritted her teeth. The Jedi underestimated her. With any luck, Palpatine would do the same. “I am not a Jedi cast-out. I betrayed them because they lost their way, because they were hypocrites and liars, because they needed to be exposed. They needed a poster child to be their villain and they cast me in that light!” A deep breath loosed from her chest, and Barriss kept her face pointed toward the ground, lest the Emperor notice the red of her cheeks.

“Do not be ashamed, child. Use your anger. Stoke it. It makes you strong. Tell me, what would the Jedi have you do with that anger?”

“Bury it,” she growled, remembering the condescending faces of her masters. The impassive Mace Windu, the self-righteous ponderings of Yoda, the false warmth of Kenobi. The cold indifference of Luminara Unduli.

Seconds passed before Palpatine spoke again, this time in the smallest of whispers. “Closer.”

Barriss Offee stood to her full height and took in the pallid face of Emperor Palpatine. His deformations were covered by a dark hood, and all she could see was the yellow pink of his

dry and wrinkled lips, bidding her closer.

She held her head high and walked until she was barely a breath away from the Emperor. Close enough to kill.

He barked out a condescending chuckle. “Tell me, child; what information have you brought for me today? Which insignificant rebel cell have you uncovered?”

She couldn’t help but fight back a smirk while she said it.

“That of your loyal foal, Darth Vader.”

Silence passed between them, and for a shadow of a second, something like doubt passed over the Emperor’s eyes. It was gone like a flash.

“Darth Vader has been trying to kill me since the day I created him. It is the way of the Sith.”

Excitement unfurled in her chest. He really didn’t know.

“Darth Vader covered up a rebel escape, and has been housing the traitor ever since. A traitor long-believed dead. Or didn’t you know?” A wicked smile curled across her face as she took in the cold presence of the Emperor’s fury.

Another icy silence lay between the two, before the Emperor finally spoke again. “Tell me more.”

“I have infiltrated the aide to Senator Mon Mothma of Chandrila. Her name is Tsabin, but she has gone by the name Sabe for over a decade. She is from your homeworld. Handmaiden to Queen-turned-Senator Padme Amidala.

“The Senator faked her own death and went into hiding in the lower levels. She often visits the aide, and I’ve been tailing them for—”

“Senator Amidala lives!?” For the first time, Emperor Palpatine let down his facade and showed his true face to Barriss. He hissed through his teeth and the cold menace of his fury filled the room “The Senator was pregnant when she faked her own death. What of the child?”

“I believe the child is housed with Bail Organa on Alderaan.”

“And Darth Vader knows this?”

Time stopped for Barriss, when she realized that she didn’t know. For all she knew, Vader was well aware of his child and he and Senator Amidala were staging a kidnapping as she spoke. She couldn’t let the Emperor know that she didn’t have all the information.

“Darth Vader is unaware for the time being. When he discovered Amidala taking part in rebel activity, he destroyed every tape with the evidence, and killed every trooper and officer who witnessed her. He took her back to his castle on Mustafar.”

Palpatine’s shaky breaths filled every crevice of the room, and Barriss couldn’t have said for how long they stood there.

“You have done well, my child. What is your proposal?”

"I go to Mustafar. Execute the Senator for rebel activity, and take Vader into custody."

"You believe you can defeat Lord Vader?" His voice grew lighter. "My apprentice?"

She took a deep breath and centered herself in her hatred.

"I have faced Anakin Skywalker in battle before." She let the revelation settle. Vader's identity wasn't difficult to parse out for anyone who had a lick of sense about them. "I nearly defeated him when he was at the height of his power in the Clone Wars. He is half the man now that he was then — more machine than man, really."

"Lord Vader has mastered the art of using his hate — and he has a lot of hate to use. It would be your own peril to underestimate him."

"His compassion for the Senator will be his weakness."

Palpatine slowly nodded. "And if it is not?"

All she had learned of the ways of the Sith — of the dark side that sat dormant in her heart for so long — the most important was that there was no such thing as going too far.

"Then I will threaten his daughter."

"And if you succeed, you wish to take his place at my side?"

Barriss looked around the room again, and took in the reality of it. Of coming to this throne room everyday, of bowing down to Emperor Palpatine, of obeying his every whim. It was a likely life for a vacuous dud like Anakin Skywalker, but for her, she dreamed of something bigger. Something better.

The sleek throne shined and glimmered in her eyes, and she gave the Emperor her best docile bow. The same one she would give to Master Unduli while she seethed on the inside.

"I will serve you until your last day, Your Highness."

"Good... Good. Now go to Mustafar, my child. I want Vader and his precious Senator alive. And make another stop on the way back — to Alderaan."

"If your mission is successful, you and I will destroy every last Skywalker in this galaxy."

Chapter 7

She was awake before her eyes opened, the gentle aroma of breakfast wafting into her nostrils, and her lips quirked up in the corners of her mouth. She let out a long and freeing breath, like she was pushing all the stress and responsibility right out of her body.

Despite her call to Sabe, she didn't feel that bad about staying in the castle. Like if they decided she was probably dead and not worth the risk... Well, maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the galaxy.

For the first time since Anakin and Padme died, Naberrie felt content. Not happy, like before. But okay with her current state of affairs.

Not that she *liked* the Emperor or the Empire, or even Darth Vader. There was still a small light of Padme Amidala inside her that would always want to fight the dictatorship.

But there was an even bigger part of Naberrie who just wanted to rest. At only 29 years old, she'd done more fighting than some people did in a lifetime. And Vader left her alone for the most part — he evidently didn't care much for her. Why not just eat his food, sleep in his bed, and spend time with his droids?

It's either that, or go back to the dregs of Coruscant. Or revealing herself as the ex-Senator Amidala, and putting her children in danger of being noticed by the Emperor.

For the first time in probably her entire life, Naberrie lay in bed much past morning, and accepted a breakfast served to her in the afternoon while she was still under the blankets in her nightclothes.

After returning from the medcenter days ago, she came back to her quarters to find three changes of clothes and some of the softest slippers she'd ever worn waiting for her on her bed. She had no clue where they came from in a castle that supposedly had no clothes, but she hadn't seen Vader again to ask. He never even came to recollect his cape. It stayed under all of her blankets, like an extra layer of security against the cold. He apparently had a closet full of black capes because he was wearing one in the medcenter. Since that day, he hadn't come to bother her once.

She had never been this pampered, even as a Queen — a Queen always had somewhere to go, a diplomatic mission to attend, a citizen to talk to. Naberrie was nobody, and nobody's were allowed to mourn after their husbands died. They weren't expected to plaster on fake joviality for the sake of someone else's comfort.

Stretching her arms to the ceiling of her white-walled room, she briefly wondered if Vader would let her decorate. She had no clue where she'd find decorations, or even what she'd choose if she had options. Her apartment in Coruscant was decorated by an interior designer from Naboo, and before that she lived in the castle, the lakehouse, or her parent's house. None of those were hers.

Not that the tiny white room with the soft pillows was hers, or the black cape. It all belonged to Darth Vader. Or Palpatine? Was Vader even allowed to own anything? Or did Palpatine claim everything that was his?

Either way, it's not as if Palpatine knew of her existence, or that Vader ever came around. He didn't even have to know. She honestly didn't believe he'd care. He could just walk in one day and see her walls decorated with... Well, with something. With something Padme would've liked. And something Anakin would've liked.

Obviously Mustafar wouldn't have anything. But it must have neighboring planets with stores. Vader probably wouldn't let *her* go, but she could send a droid, and he wouldn't have to know...

"B2," Padme spoke into her communicator to the droid team. "I'm looking for civilized planets in this sector."

The voice came back instantaneously.

"You're not allowed to leave the castle, mistress."

Naberrie sighed and stood up, taking stock of the room around her. "I know, B2. It's okay, you can go without me. I just want something for my room. I can't stand staring at these white walls all day."

An intense shuffling came through the speaker. Naberrie paused and held her breath, listening for any small clue. Did Palpatine finally show his face in the castle?

Was Sabe making her daring rescue, while Naberrie was trying to decorate her jail cell?

"B2, what's happening?" She asked, trying to keep her tone under control. "Is everything okay out there?"

"Mistress," the droid warbled. "Mistress, maybe you should —"

The door flew open with a gust of wind so strong that it nearly knocked her to the floor. Using the bedside table to keep herself upright, she stood tall.

Darth Vader took up the entire frame of her doorway, his long black cape billowing behind him. His modulated breaths came out soft and slow, like he was purposely slowing them down to stop that horrible wheezing sound.

"Hello," Naberrie squeaked out as well as she could, trying to remember the commanding voice of Queen Amidala. "I assume you heard my conversation with B2."

"Yes," Darth Vader said, his heavy voice modulator coming out in a near whisper. He lifted his head, and though Naberrie couldn't see his eyes under those dark orbs, it was obvious he was taking stock of the room. "Are the chambers not to your liking?"

The dark black mask stared her down, somehow piercing directly into her very soul, willing her to speak.

"My chambers are fine." Naberrie attempted to walk the fine line of not explicitly complaining about her room (so she isn't sent to a real prison cell) while still getting what she

wanted. "But if I'm going to be sitting in them all day every day for an undisclosed period of time, I'd like something to look at."

Naberrie and Vader both remained glued to their spots, and the space between them was so bursting it was practically electric. She could actually viscerally *feel* his presence across the room, reaching out and wrapping her in it.

He must really hate when prisoners file complaints with the droids about the wall decor of their cell block.

"What kind..." Vader paused between slow breaths, like every word was a struggle for him, like he was doing all he could to control his voice underneath the weight of its modulator. "Of decorations would please you?

Her heart thudded so heavily in her chest she was sure Vader could hear it from across the room. She lifted her palms to rub the sweat onto her pants, and her entire arm shivered under his gaze.

Why does Darth Vader care what would please me?

"I suppose," she paused, trying to hide the tremble in her voice. "Something from my home planet."

He only nodded, a patently ridiculous response since he had no clue where Naberrie was from. Naberrie didn't even know where she'd say she was from, or why she even admitted to Palpatine's second in command that she was homesick. Her emotions were none of *his* business.

"Come with me." His soft voice ushered through the mask while he turned out of the room and down the corridor of the castle. Seeing few other options, Naberrie quietly padded behind him.

Well, this is it. This is where he will finally kill me.

Naberrie silently laughed at the cruel irony of it all. Finally, she was feeling somewhat content, and now she had to die? At the hands of Vader?

For some reason, the thought of Vader doing the killing made it all the more painful. The thought of Vader actually carrying out the act of killing her...

Well, it felt preposterous.

Which was totally ridiculous. She watched as he murdered stormtroopers in front of her eyes, like they were nothing to him. They *were* nothing to him. Just another white bucket over a head that he wasn't concerned about. Another expendable trooper.

Like she was another expendable prisoner. Whatever nice moment she'd thought they had was totally imagined.

"I really don't care about my room," Naberrie said, hoping she didn't sound too desperate. "It's okay, I don't mind staring at white walls every day."

Vader ignored her as he stalked down the corridor, barely turning his head to glance at her as she pleaded.

She was surprised to find how desperately she wanted to live. Two years of wishing for nothing but a sweet release, now that it was being granted to her, she was begging to live?

What did she have to live for anyway?

They turned onto the final corridor and into a room larger than Padme Amidala's entire apartment on Coruscant, devoid of all light, and the cold morphing into her skin. The shivers traveled up her arms and onto her shoulders and back, and Naberrie couldn't help but rub her hands up and down her arms for warmth.

Vader took one step closer to her, carefully placing his feet beside hers, but made no move to touch her. Only stood by her, the warmth of his cloak and suit spreading into her space.

"I can turn on the artificial heat," Vader said quietly by her side, as he reached a hand into his belt and pulled out a small remote device. With a touch of a button, a warm glow spread over them, lighting the circle around Vader and Naberrie.

"What?" She said between teeth chatters. "You're not killing me here?"

Vader's hand paused in midair, hovering above the device he'd pulled out, and he slowly turned his head to look at her, the surprise evident in his body language, though his face was the same menacing ever-still mask.

"I've told you many times," He breathed slowly. "I'm not going to kill you."

A pregnant pause lay between them, before he breathed out, so quietly she almost couldn't discern it.

"Ever."

A soft heat spread throughout the room, and Naberrie lifted her hands from her arms, and the room went to a slightly-warm neutral temperature. Like she'd always kept in her Coruscant apartment.

"Are these my new chambers?" She asked, her voice echoing off the walls, telling her that the darkened room was totally empty. "Bigger than my last. A little dark." She attempted humor and smiled up at him. He only stared back in response, and she wondered if he smiled under the helmet. If he even *could* smile.

"If you'll have them," Vader said, and pressed another button on his remote control.

The entire wall opened up to a screen stretching the length of the room. The deep blackness of space lay before them, stars shining brightly enough to light up the room, Naberrie's own face lit up as well, and she turned to look at Vader who only remained staring out into the window of space.

"What is this?"

"The stars." He answered simply, still not peeling his eyes away from the spectacle before them.

"I know it's the stars," Naberrie took a deep breath but didn't turn away from the screen. "Is it footage? From a ship?"

That's how it felt. Like she was sitting at the helm of a ship, all technology stripped away from view, and it was just her and the stars, and the simple deepness of space — and him.

Vader paused, picking each word carefully. "It's a drone. I built it, and connected its viewport to this screen. I can use this device to enter coordinates, so I can see anywhere in the galaxy."

The black-gloved hand held out the remote device, and Naberrie lifted her hand to take it from him, her head shaking in awe.

"You built this?" Vader nodded. "This is..." She let out a breath. "Breathtaking."

"You may put in the coordinates of your home planet. If you wish to see it."

Naberrie grabbed for the remote device, goosebumps spreading up her arms when her hand brushed against Vader's black gloves. She chided herself for being so girlishly silly. *It's only because you haven't touched a man in over two years. It has nothing to do with Darth Vader.*

Obviously it had nothing to do with Darth Vader. She couldn't enjoy touching *his* hands — she wasn't even sure his hands were organic.

Not that that ever bothered her with Anakin.

She eagerly went to punch in the codes for Naboo, when her hand paused above the buttons and hovered there, her breathing turning short, as she eyed the man beside her.

Could this all possibly be an elaborate ruse to find the location of her home planet? How long could she pretend she wasn't formerly Padme Amidala if she brought up Naboo on the screen?

Vader shuffled beside her, and something about the way he moved almost seemed... Earnest. Like he really wanted her to enjoy the view screen, and he didn't want her to be homesick anymore. When she arrived there, he said that he wanted her to enjoy her life in the castle. At the time she thought it to be a ploy so she'd let down her guard.

But the image of Darth Vader, tall and imposing Darth Vader, with his crimson lightsaber and his cybernetic breathing, hunched over a tiny drone and connecting its viewport to this room so he could see the stars... Every star system in the world, at his disposal.

Underneath the black mask of Darth Vader lived a man who wanted nothing more than to see all the stars in the galaxy.

She quietly tapped the keys in front of her, and the idyllic aqua, greens, and white of Naboo filled the viewscreen. She inhaled sharply and covered her mouth while tears stung at the corners of her eyes.

Naboo. She thought she'd never see Naboo again.

Vader gently took the control back from her and tapped more of the keys, sending the drone right up to the planet's edge, skirting its atmosphere as it circled around. A green hue shone up from the edges, as if wrapping Naboo in a protective cocoon, using its bright green light to shield it from the galaxy.

Naberrie could've used her own bright green shield.

The drone moved from the planet's surface and onto to the surrounding stars, each one shining brighter than the next, with the light green hue from the planet mixing with the deep blues of the sky, and the bright white of the stars piercing through all of it, leaving the galaxy in it's ray of light.

Tears openly flowed down Naberrie's face as she wiped them away with the back of her hand and looked up to Vader.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice still trembling with barely contained emotions. "This is perfect."

Darth Vader only nodded in response, and they both turned to look out the viewscreen together.

The drone traveled it's way along the galaxy, showing Naberrie constellations and systems long forgotten. While staring into the heart of a burned out star, Naberrie reached out her hand to Darth Vader. He stared at it in question, before finally lifting his own hand in response and laying in gently atop hers.

"It really makes you wonder," Naberrie said, embracing the warmth of another human hand over hers. Of *Vader*'s hand over hers. "Seeing the galaxy like this. It makes you wonder what all the fighting and suffering was really for."

Vader nodded and took a small breath, like he was fighting to hold back every emotion he ever had, every thought left unsaid. Naberrie squeezed his hand in response, feeling the wiring of a machine underneath, and embracing it.

Finally turning away from the beauty of space, Naberrie faced Darth Vader head on, dropping his hand and looking straight into his mask, hoping her eyes would find his own.

"You will never hurt me." She meant to ask a question, but it came out as a fact, and she knew the truth of it before he even answered.

"No."

They spent the evening side by side, with the most perfect view in the galaxy, somehow both together and across the stars.

Chapter 8

Naberrie lived day and night in the company of the stars.

Vader set her up with her own remote control device, so she could control the lighting and temperature of her room, and no one but her could decide when she would sleep, when she would eat, and at which times she would do whatever she felt like doing.

It turned out that being a prisoner was the most freeing experience of her life. Being Darth Vader's prisoner came with more freedoms than being a queen or a senator. Darth Vader's prisoner didn't have to go to bed by a certain time, and she woke up only when her body was ready to wake up. She lived by every star the galaxy had to offer, and the deep expanse of space filled her heart. The freeing realization that she was just one small human, living a small life, in a galaxy that never ends. The gaping hole in her heart left by Anakin's death was nothing next to the blackness of space.

And she was free to dream of Anakin. She'd lie in her bed, so soft she felt like she was floating, staring at the stars and she pictured Anakin so clearly in her mind, that she would've sworn he was beside her, his chest rising and falling in tune with hers. The presence of her husband in the castle was so visceral, that Naberrie often had to remind herself that it was all in her head.

She had dreamed so deeply of Anakin, she was sure he was still alive. That the past two years had been nothing but a horrible nightmare. He moved beside her, and lifted his hand to caress her face. He sat beside her bed and stroked her hair.

When she woke up he was gone. And she was left with nothing but an empty shell, a fake name, babies that were taken from her, and a wound that cut so deeply, even the stars couldn't repair it.

She turned her back on the stars that day and only stared at her blank wall, letting the tears flow and the sobs rake through her body until it physically hurt to breathe.

Something else Vader gave her — time to cry. Life on the lower levels of Coruscant didn't permit a moment's weakness. Life as a senator didn't permit a moment's weakness.

The hatch door to her room slid open, and Naberrie bolted upright. Instinctively, she knew it wasn't B2. She let out a small sniffle and wiped her eyes without looking back at him.

Relief from her sorrow washed over her as Darth Vader moved closer.

It was only because there was another person in the room. A reminder that she wasn't the only one left in the entire galaxy. It had nothing to do with Vader on a personal level.

Obviously.

"Are you alright?" Vader asked in his normal slow fashion, as if he were handpicking every word with care.

"Yes," she said, a bit too firmly even to her own ears. "I'm going to be okay. I'm just... missing someone."

She turned to peak at Vader. He only nodded before turning to leave. "The droid is making dinner. You may eat it here if you wish."

"It's my husband," Naberrie yelled over him, not knowing why she needed to tell him this. "My husband died on this planet." Vader turned back to look at her and they held each other in their eyes, Naberrie finally working up the strength to ask the question that had been plaguing her since their arrival on Mustafar.

"Did you know him? Anakin Skywalker." She nearly choked on his name, a name that she barely said aloud anymore.

Vader stalked down the length of the room, but his quick movements didn't scare Naberrie. She sat up straighter and held his stoic gaze, lifting her chin in the most Queenly manner she could conjure up.

"Why do you ask me that?" His voice came out sharper than she'd ever heard it — as sharp as it did when he spoke to stormtroopers.

Naberrie paused, not knowing how to answer the question without insulting him. *Because he was Palpatine's first choice for an apprentice? Because he died washed up on your fields of lava, probably screaming in pain right on your doorstep?*

"Because the last time I saw him was on Mustafar. Because he had the Force, and people with the Force can sense each other. Because he was close with Palpatine before he died, and I assume you've been around for longer than two years. I thought that was why you took me prisoner!"

Vader stared out at the stars, lifting his head as if deeply considering his next words.

He knelt by Naberrie's side, and slowly lifted his hand in offer to hers. She took his fingers in her palm and held on, relishing the touch of another person, basking in the warmth of another's presence.

"The Emperor... does not know you are here. And I will keep it that way."

She only nodded, still without answers about her husband's death. The tears fell again. *Why was it so important to her that Darth Vader knew Anakin?*

"I thought that was why you were protecting me," she admitted, even embarrassed by Vader seeing her sniffly crying face. "I thought you knew Anakin, and you were protecting me for him."

"I am sorry," Vader said. His normally menacing voice raised up a pitch and he sounded so... genuine, so sincere that Naberrie only cried harder.

Not even attempting to compose herself, she kept crying as she spoke.

"I just miss him so much... I haven't been the same since he died. I lived in the lower levels of Coruscant, every day just wishing that a stray laser blast would hit me and I'd die, buried in an unmarked grave and be *forgotten*, that everyone would just keep living without

me and my spirit wouldn't have to live in obligatory agony, that I'd just *be with him* and never have to worry again.

"I considered ending it myself. Just getting myself a blaster, and ending it all right there. I still consider it sometimes. But then..."

But then I remember Luke and Leia.

She stopped herself. Although Darth Vader turned out to be an exceptional listener, she couldn't betray her children to him. No one in the Empire could know her children survived birth. He could know her, but he couldn't know them.

Vader carefully sat at the edge of her bed and watched her intently, his head tilted like it was difficult to hear.

"That suit must be awfully uncomfortable." She quickly moved past the point and hoped the comment didn't offend him. The diplomat inside her was too tired to think of a tactful way to say it.

"Yes," he answered simply, accepting her change of subject.

She turned back to the viewscreen and watched as the drone approached another supernova. The burned out stars spread so much color across her room that it lit up her face, and reminded her — even death can be beautiful.

"Were you always like this?" She whispered, not wanting to look at Vader as she asked him a deeply personal question, and instead concentrated on the pinks and blues flowing across her screen. "I mean, were you always in the suit? Sleeping in bacta tanks?"

Vader hung his head low, and took a deep heaving breath, before peaking up at the burned star and eventually landing his gaze on Naberrie.

"No."

Though she already knew the answer, the word hung between them like ice that pierced through her heart.

A man lived underneath the black cybernetic. A living human suffocated under the black mask, day in and day out, while a machine breathed for him, while another voice came out of his mouth. He used hands that weren't his own, and a pack on his chest was all that kept him alive.

And the worst part was that he could still remember a life before the suit. He could feel humanity at a distance, but could never quite touch it. Between him and life stood the black mask of Vader.

"What happened?"

His silence was answer enough, Naberrie remembering enough of Padme Amidala to know that she shouldn't push him. He didn't have to tell her all of his inner thoughts and feelings. Up until a few days earlier, she hardly considered that he even had inner thoughts and feelings.

Deciding on the only course of action that felt natural, Naberrie reached out her arms and took Vader in her embrace. He stiffened under her touch at first, before finally letting go of his trepidation and melting into her. She couldn't have said how long they stayed like that — only a few moments or the entire night. But her embrace with the Sith Lord Darth Vader was a fleeting moment of honest humanity that Naberrie would hold on to with all her might. A reminder of who she used to be — a person that saw the best in others.

"Thank you," she whispered into his shoulder, not entirely sure what she was thanking him for, but only knowing that it felt right.

"I haven't done anything," the deep voice muffled by her hair felt almost vulnerable. A side of Darth Vader that she was certain no one before her had ever seen.

She let him go and held onto his shoulders, holding his gaze, making sure that even though she couldn't see his eyes staring back at her, that he knew she could see him. The real him — the man underneath the mask. The man who suffered day in and day out, his only consolation being the stars, but he still gave those to her.

"You reminded me of who I am. I know you aren't ready to tell me your name — your real name, not Darth Vader — but I want you to know mine." She dropped her arms to her sides, and only kept out one hand, allowing it to be covered by his.

"My name is not Naberrie. I took it on after my husband and baby died, and I felt like I just had to be someone else for a little while, to forget my life, to forget them. Not that I wanted to forget them, but it was too painful. So I took on someone else's life, complete with a fake name, temporary jobs for money, and moving apartments every time a neighbor looked at me too many times.

"Like I told you, my husband was Anakin Skywalker. He was a Jedi Knight and General of the Clone Wars before the fall of the Order. Jedi weren't supposed to marry, so we had to keep our relationship a secret. It was painful at the time, and in hindsight I wish we were more honest so I could've had more time with him, I have to admit that a part of me enjoyed the drama of sneaking around. My... career required me to remain professional and diplomatic at all times. With him, the days were exciting and the nights were safe, lying in each other's arms."

Naberrie caught herself reminiscing on her marriage of the past, but Vader didn't stop her. He kept his dark gaze on her the entire time, his helmet tilted toward her mouth, like he intently didn't want to miss a word of her story.

"Is it hard to hear in that helmet?" She asked, squeezing the cybernetic fingers lying over hers.

"Yes."

"Well I want you to hear this," Naberrie sidled up beside him, shifting herself to sit in his lap, and lay her forehead on his helmet so her lips grazed where his ears should be. "My name is Padme Amidala. I was the Queen of Naboo for four years at the age of 14. I went on to represent Naboo in the Republic Senate. I fought for the Republic my entire life, allowing myself only one weakness in Anakin Skywalker."

She held onto his body with all her strength, having no wish to let go of the human touch she'd be yearning for so long, and finally Vader lifted his own hands and held her gently around the waist.

"And they were both taken from you," he said quietly, the voice modulator emphasizing the tremble in his voice.

"Yes. So I faked my own death. The only reason I was on your prison ship was to rescue an old friend. I got caught because I had to waste time convincing him that it was actually me." Padmé looked from Vader and back up to the burning star, its center nearly exploding with a light so bright it could blind the entire galaxy.

"I called off the warrant," Darth Vader said, while pulling Padme in closer, one hand moving up her back and grazing her shoulder. Tingles shot down her spine, and she swallowed the bit of requisite guilt, laying her head on his broad shoulder. "On Bail Organa. I told the Emperor that he was not the rebel."

Padme smiled to herself, curling her head further into the crook of his neck and shoulder.

"You know, being captured by you might be the best thing that's happened to me since the fall of the Republic."

Padme stayed awake watching the supernova with Darth Vader until she fell asleep in his arms. He gently laid her back down on the bed, tucked her under the blanket, and turned away for his isolated bacta tank in the west sector.

Chapter 9

“Mistress Naberrie,” A holo of B2 popped up from the comm on the bedside table. “Spat’s gettin’ your breakfast ready, and he wants you to know that Lord Vader will be joining you.”

She sat up straight up bed, exhaustion no longer clouding her senses.

“Lord Vader? He can...”

She didn’t want to finish the sentence, for fear of disrespect. Darth Vader had been kind to her. He took care of her. Questioning his ability to eat seemed rude, under the circumstances.

“The Dark Lord gets his nourishment from intravenous tubes. But he would like to sit with you while you eat.”

The smile nearly broke her face in half. Hoping to hide her obvious excitement from B2, she tucked in her chin.

“The Lord himself will bring up your breakfast,” B2 moved to turn off the holoprojector. “Signing off —”

“Wait, B2!”

“What is it, miss?” The droid actually sounded worried.

“My name isn’t Naberrie,” She admitted out loud, finally feeling comfortable in her own skin, her memories no longer leaving scorching burn marks on her heart. She was ready to embrace every facet of herself — whatever that meant. “Please. Call me Padme.”

The droid’s face emanated a soft glow that Padme could’ve sworn was a smile.

“Signing off, Mistress Padme.”

Alone again in her chambers with only the company of the stars, Padme had to bite her lip to keep from smiling. Not a shy, demure smile, but a big goofy smile that went all the way up to her eyes. She hadn’t felt this happy since...

Since she had a picnic with Anakin in the field on Naboo. She cherished every memory of her husband, but so many of them were now fraught with mourning and grief, the regret of their secret weighing down her heart when she thought of the short shared moments. Stolen kisses when nobody was looking. It was no way to be married. He deserved better — *she* deserved better. Their relationship deserved better. Having to pretend the other didn’t matter, barely existed.

Of course, that was always the difference between her and her husband; he never pretended.

Naboo was her only pure memory left — no regrets taunting it. Just them and their love.

Maybe she was getting a chance to do it right.

Anakin had jealousy issues — she shuddered to think of his reaction to Rush Clovis — but despite his protestations, his love was stronger than all of that. His love was stronger than anything. That's what she tried to tell Obi-Wan on what was supposed to be her deathbed. He wouldn't want Padme to be alone forever. He wouldn't have wanted her to spend two years in the lower levels of Coruscant, waiting to die.

She rolled out of bed and skipped to the other edge of the room, quickly realizing her predicament:

She had no wardrobe.

Padme Amidala was known for many things in her lifetime — her tenure as Queen of Naboo, her rise in the Republic Senate, her strong stand against the creation of the Clone Army. And she was also known for her formal dresses and extravagant headpieces. She'd given all that up after her "death", but for the first time in two years, she wanted it all back.

She wanted it all back and then more. She found her identity again as Padme Amidala-Naberrie, but she didn't have to be the Senator or the former royal anymore — not while she was with Vader. She could be Padme Amidala with Padme's sense of style.

Whatever that actually was when you stripped away the distracting headdresses and complicated gowns.

A soft knock sounded at her door, and Padme's head snapped up. She ran her hands through her hair, wondering why she was all of a sudden worried about her appearance. Vader wasn't the type to fuss.

Padme wasn't the type to fuss.

"Come in," she called, the cheer in her voice actually genuine for once.

The hatchway opened, revealing Vader holding a tray of food with a small vase on the edge holding a single flower. Her heart soared and her smile with it. Spat never gave her a flower with her food. She pictured Vader in his quarters, selecting a flower and carefully placing it in a little blue vase. Just for her.

Which meant that there were flowers somewhere in Fortress Vader. Bright and new life growing in the midst of burning pools of lava.

"Hello," she said, trying to keep her voice steady with her heart fluttering about. "Good morning. Nice to see you."

Was that enough greetings?

"Hello," his deep voice trembled, and he held out the tray for her. "I brought your breakfast."

"Yes, please, sit," Padme gestured to the small folding table in the corner, taking the tray from him. Her fingertip brushed his palm, and for once she didn't pull away.

Vader took the seat closest to the door, his black draped mechanical body looking totally out of place on the tiny folding chair set up in her room.

Padme cut into her fruit, staring up at the unspeaking man before her. “I feel a little silly. Eating this great breakfast that Spat made, and not offering you any.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” Padme snapped, before catching herself and going back to a more even tone. “Please, stay with me. I haven’t had someone to eat with since...” She thought back to the lower levels of Coruscant. She rarely stayed at Sabe’s apartment for long enough to share a meal — Sabe often had to eat with Mon anyway. “Well, it’s been a long time.”

She smiled across the table at him, and Padme could feel his smile back. He exuded the unquantifiable energy that a person gave off when they smiled. Vader might’ve had a helmet on, but he possessed that energy.

They sat across each other in a companionable silence while Padme ate, and unlike her frequent senatorial dinners, or rushed catch up conversations with her husband, Padme felt no need to fill the air with conversation. They could just sit and enjoy each other, the galaxy moving in the background.

After finishing her meal (she allowed herself to savor every bite), she picked up the pink flower and brought it to her nose. “Thank you for bringing this for me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said slowly. “B2 plants them. She helped me pick one.

“I came here for a reason,” Vader rushed out the words quickly, like he wanted to get them out before he could stop himself. He paused and looked down before continuing. “I need you to pack a bag, and meet me tonight. In the foyer.”

“Pack a bag?” She smiled. Only a few short days ago, she would’ve thought he was hauling her off to prison, or to her execution. Now she only wondered what Vader could’ve planned for her. “Are we going somewhere?”

Vader gathered up his cape in a swirl and stood to his full height, moving toward the door. Padme tilted her head up at the mysterious man in black, her eyes dancing across his figure.

He was tall. She’d learned at a young age that she liked tall men. And his width was at least double hers, a fact she’d discovered when she sat in his lap and burrowed herself into him. She felt *safe* with him. The kind of safety she hadn’t felt since Anakin.

“Tonight, then?” Padme nodded, and he sauntered out of the room, Padme staring at his empty chair with a mixture of nervous excitement and impending loneliness.

Until their date.

She’d never been on a real date before. Not unless she counted when she was hiding from an assassin trying to kill her, and sat in a field on Naboo with Anakin. Or their jaunt in the droid factories on Geonosis. Never a “meet me tonight and I’ll surprise you” date. Although she mourned not having the opportunity with her husband while he was alive, she wasn’t ashamed to say that it was nice to have it now.

Vader said to pack a bag. He didn’t say where they were going, for how long they’d be gone, or what she needed to pack. Since her death, she’d lost most of her possessions anyway; she only had the clothes she wore, a couple of changes, slippers, a nightgown, Vader’s cape, and a necklace carved by a little boy on Tatooine. It took only a few moments to pile it all on

her table, and get back into bed. She allowed herself to revel in all the stars of the galaxy, without feeling guilt over Anakin, or Sabe, or Bail with her daughter, or Obi-Wan Kenobi with her son.

The stars brought her to a special kind of serenity that no one else in the galaxy would ever understand.

Except Darth Vader.

She didn't even allow herself to feel guilty over the fledgling relationship she was developing with him. Anakin was a jealous husband, but he wouldn't want her to be alone. And she couldn't be with her children. Why should she be lonely?

It was the former Queen's best-kept secret: the terror of dying alone. No one to hold her as she died. No one to say good-bye to.

The first time she "died" — where she wanted to die, where she thought Amidala died and the elusive Naberrie was born — she only had Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi at her side, and she used her dying breath to tell him that he was wrong about Anakin, that there was always good in him, that the good in him would never die. She still believed it with all her heart, and she only hoped that Anakin knew the same about her. That he was one with the Force and watching over her somehow, and he knew that she would never trust Darth Vader if she didn't see the good in him as well. She didn't care what Sabe would think of the relationship, or even Bail and Mon. Only Anakin.

He trusted her judgment. And she trusted her own judgment. There was good in Darth Vader. Even if he didn't know it about himself yet, *she* knew it.

That had to be enough.

When the time came to dress herself and go to the foyer, the small fire of her old life flared and she missed Sabe, allowing herself a moment of guilt for the woman who was probably worried for her friend's life. All Padme could hope for was that she was assumed dead, and Sabe, Bail, and Mon could all move on with their lives.

Maybe Vader would file a false report that said she was executed for rebel activity.

The galaxy needed to believe that a leader from their past was fighting for their freedom — even if it wasn't true. Even if rebelling against the Empire as a lone person would be fruitless.

Her simple tunic and pants covered the scars that lined her arms, and she pulled her hair up into a bun that took nearly an hour to perfect; even if she didn't have the gowns from her old life, that didn't mean she couldn't strategically frame her hair around her face, or make herself look as presentable as possible. Looking in the mirror, she was actually happy with the results. Her beauty didn't need to be accentuated by dramatic makeup, gowns, and headdresses. The simplicity was enough. She was no longer just Naberrie, or the former Queen of Naboo, Senator Amidala, or the wife of the late Anakin Skywalker.

She was a woman.

A woman who was going to meet a man.

She walked down the hall, her new slippers lightly padding against the marble floors, and her teeth nearly chattering with excitement. This — whatever she had with Darth Vader — could be the answer. Not only to her own struggles in life, but the struggle throughout the galaxy. She saw the real man underneath the mask. The man who didn't have her executed for treason, who lied to protect Bail Organa. The man who wanted to see the stars. He couldn't believe in dictators and fascism and the loss of liberty.

This could be how the entire galaxy was freed. The redemption of one man was enough of a spark to set the entire galaxy against Palpatine. Since the day on the prison ship, Padme had never seen Vader be anything but gentle. This was the real him. What he showed to the galaxy, what he showed to Palpatine — that was the true mask.

She knew she could convince him. She could even call Sabe again and they could all work together.

She reached the dining hall and found him standing against the doorway that led to the West Sector.

"Hello," her voice was light and girlish, and she loved every moment of it. The door behind him remained closed, and Vader made no move to open it. "Are we going in the West Sector?" She slowly led him on, hoping that the answer was yes.

"No." He confirmed. "The droids are collecting something for you."

She looked down to hide her disappointment.

"It is what was behind the door."

She snapped her head up when the droids came barreling behind him, carrying a large rectangular box, tall yet flat, and covered by a curtain. B2 was at the end of the line, holding a smaller box, this one a bit fatter than the rectangle, but also covered.

"What is all this?"

Vader held out of hand and slowly lifted up a finger, taking the rectangular box from the droid's arms and held it up casually with the Force.

"Follow me."

They walked through the entire castle without speaking a word to each other, but it wasn't an awkward silence that needed to be filled with words. It was a companionable and comfortable silence, one that warmed her heart and chased away the darkness of her thoughts.

The entrance of the castle loomed ahead of them and Padme looked to Vader. "What about the roggwarts?"

"I will kill the roggwarts." He answered simply before slamming a button next to the doorway and it slid open. He held out an arm, gesturing for her to go first.

The open expanse of Mustafar spread out around her, and she paused to look at the burning lava and greenish hue of the night sky. It was night time. She hadn't kept track of the time since arriving on Fortress Vader.

“B2, take these items to the landing pad.” Vader handed off the rectangular box to his droid companion. “We will join you there shortly.”

“Right away, Lord Vader.”

The droid team hustled off and Padme’s heart raced in her chest. “Landing pad? We’re actually leaving this burning rock?”

Vader hung his head low. He lifted a hand in offer, and slowly took it back down, like he thought better of it.

“*You are leaving this burning rock.*” He averted his eyes and whipped around, his cape flying behind him as he stalked to the landing pad.

“Excuse me?!” Padme yelled after him, struggling to keep up with his long strides. “You’re sending me away?”

The familiar creeping weight from her throat fell back into her chest and all the way into her shoes, and she could only fight to keep her chin from trembling. She chased him all the way to the landing pad until they came upon the ship with its ramp lowered, the droids slowly trudging up with the boxes, bickering amongst themselves, hurt lacing throughout her entire body. *He’s sending me away?*

“Am I to go back to the prison ship, then?” Her voice came out sharp and angry, a mask to hide her true hurt, the heartbreak in her movements. She had finally gotten comfortable. She truly believed they had something with each other.

How could she be so *stupid* to believe that Darth Vader wanted to... to *be* with her, to have a life with her?

She reached up her arm to pull on his shoulder, and he turned to look at her again.

“I have programmed the navicomputer with coordinates. It will take you to a remote civilized planet just outside of Wild Space. I recommend staying there for awhile before moving again.”

Her brow furrowed and she looked desperately around the landing pad. He wasn’t sending her back to the Imperial prison, he was just sending her away.

He didn’t want to hurt her — he just didn’t want her.

“I don’t understand.” She said. “Why did you ever bring me here in the first place if you were just going to send me out to a random planet on the outskirts of Wild Space to fend for myself?!” She gestured wildly around her. “You could’ve killed me. You could have tortured me, you could have kept me truly locked away. Instead you saved me from the roggwart, healed my wounds, showed me the stars, and gave me a room to sleep in.

“Why did you take me from the prison ship in the first place? Is it because of who I am? Because I told you my real name?”

Vader’s breathing steadied and the space between them filled with every word left unspoken. Every explanation, every admission, every emotion hung between them, waiting to be embraced.

"There are enough credits in the ship to last for your lifetime. B2 is prepared to join you."

He stepped out of the way and held out an arm, gesturing for her to go ahead.

Her breathing slowed and tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, skin burning — she couldn't have said if it was from the lava surrounding them, or her own rage.

"I am not *going anywhere!*!" She yelled and stalked toward Vader until she was only inches from him, staring up into his mask. When she tilted her head at the exact right angle, she could've sworn she saw the shadow of his eyes. "I am not leaving this planet until you tell me *WHY!*"

The energy from her voice actually swished Vader's cape back, and he nearly backed away from her before stopping and taking a step closer.

He thrust out a hand and pointed behind him. "Stop arguing and get on the ship."

His mask hovered so close, she could make out the shape of his entire face. She moved even closer and dared him. "Make me."

Vader's breathing slowed and he lowered down so his face was level with hers. "Do not tempt me."

Padme had no intention of leaving Mustafar. She would find another roggwart and allow it to kill her before she got on that ship willingly. She dodged out of the way, and took off, away from Vader and the castle, back out onto the fields of lava.

Before she could reach, Vader came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, forcibly lifting her entire body off the ground and throwing her over his shoulder with the ease one might use to lift a small stone.

Using all her momentum and the bit of weight still left on her body, Padme pulled with all her strength, so she might go to the ground and take the massive brick wall that was Darth Vader down with her. Her movements didn't even appear to register to Vader as he only shifted his shoulders to accommodate her kicking.

"How *DARE YOU?!*" She screamed so loudly she was sure the roggwarts could hear from wherever they went when they weren't terrorizing people. "You bring me to this *planet* ", she kneed him in the shoulder and grunted when bone met armor." You tell me *NOTHING*', Vader lifted a hand to grab an errant ankle that flew wildly over his head, threatening to knock off that awful helmet. "Then you heal my wounds, you give me a view of the entire *galaxy*", They moved closer to the ship, only a few feet away now as she came into view of all the droids gathering at the ramp, still holding the curtained boxes. "And then you just send me away, *again* with no explanation!" She gestured wildly with her hands, the novelty of being lifted on her side causing her to lose all sense of direction as she only pointed at the air surrounding them, and Vader used his free hand to grab both of her wrists.

"I will not be manhandled!"

Vader moved to lower her to the ground when they reached the boarding ramp, and using the one second of leverage, Padme took all of the stored up strength inside of her and pulled herself out of his grasp and went flying out of his arms and into the curtained box.

Her back cracked against the hard surface, and she let out an awful cry of pain as the contents of the box fell out onto the landing pad.

Vader stood stricken, looking from the fallen Padme to what lay between them — the contents of his secret room in the West Sector.

A yellow gold corset peaked out from the box, and all pain from the crash forgotten, Padme shot to her feet, eyes wild as she lifted the curtain.

Tumbling from the now cracked open box was a yellow lace cape, specially made and embroidered just for her, with a floral pattern to match the corset. The ribbons from the sleeves shone out underneath, and Padme's hands trembled as she reached out to touch them.

Underneath the yellow gown lay a pink ombre that she instantly recognized, and underneath that she found a headdress of Queen Amidala and a torn white battle outfit and even the matching cape, the one she thought she'd lost on Geonosis.

Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith had her gowns — he had what appeared to be her entire wardrobe. Her gowns that were gone the day Sabe moved into her old apartment.

Darth Vader went into an abandoned apartment of a dead senator and stole her wardrobe.

Why?

He already knew who she was.

The entire world stopped moving around her, and all that existed in the world was the wardrobe of Amidala, and Darth Vader, who had been harboring it in a castle in Mustafar.

"Vader," her voice shook with barely contained fury, and when she snapped up her head to look at him her teeth were bared. "These are my gowns."

Vader said nothing and all that filled the space between them was the horrible scratching breath. B2 shuffled in between them, flailing her arms around, like she was going to pick up the gowns.

"I'm terribly sorry, my Dark Lord, we couldn't move in time, I know the dresses were meant to be a surprise for the mistress, and—"

"It's not your fault, B2." Padme held out a hand to cut off the droid, but her eyes never left that black mask. "Why do you have my gowns?"

"You need to leave this planet." Though he spoke a command, Vader's voice was noticeably less confident. Like he had been shaken. "We are running out of time."

"No, NO you don't get to *tell* me to leave the planet, because you stole my gowns out of my apartment when the galaxy believed I was dead, and you HID THEM up in your castle, so right now, *I'm* making the decisions, and *I'm* asking the questions."

"Who exactly are you?"

A deep throaty cackling laugh sounded from above, from right atop the ship, and Padme whipped around right as Vader brandished his lightsaber and it sprang to life.

“You really don’t know?” The light voice sounded directly in her ears, a taunt, each word laughing. Each word a slice in her chest, a reminder that she had no control.

A figure in black, no larger than Padme herself, jumped down and faced her. The same helmet that greeted her on Sabe’s patio.

“You really aren’t as smart as they are, are you, Senator?” The title was another mock, a reminder of who she used to be. Senator Amidala would have never found herself in this situation.

Vader prowled closer, his lightsaber still at the ready, like waiting for the best moment to strike.

“You pretended to be Sabe’s friend,” Padme said before she even truly processed it in her own head. “You gained her trust. You hide behind that helmet, you sneak around on Coruscant, and now on Mustafar? What do you even want?”

She lifted the helmet off her head, revealing the petite and prim smirk of Barriss Offee.

“You!?” Padme and Vader both said at once, and Padme, the opponent forgotten, whipped around on Vader. “You know Barriss Offee!?”

Barriss threw her helmet to the ground and pulled out a lightsaber and when she ignited it, the same red as Vader’s shined. “You really don’t know anything do you? You stupid woman. Of course he knows me. He’s the one who destroyed my life.”

Vader let out a growl at the insult and moved closer, but still not making a move to strike.

“I came here on a mission for my new master.” Barriss flashed a crimson smile at Vader. “It appears you’ve been forgotten.”

Vader shot out a hand and Force-pushed Padme and the droids to the edge of the landing pad before moving on his opponent.

Chapter 10

Barriss flipped over the landing pad, agile and nimble as any Jedi. She soared above Vader until she landed at the platform of the castle, and he jumped immediately after her, less nimble and more like a towering giant, taking down everything in his path. Barriss easily rolled out of the way, and dodged every one of his slashes.

Big, strong swings wouldn't defeat her. Rather than being intimidated by his foreboding presence, she used her own slight size against him.

Padme came to her feet, stopping just above the gowns of Queen and Senator Amidala — *her gowns*.

Vader had her gowns hidden away in his castle. He took her prisoner, he protected her, he lied to the Emperor for her. He knows Barriss Offee, and was the man she held responsible for destroying her life.

"B2." Padme's voice was thick and dry. "We need to get to them."

"Mistress, the Dark Lord was clear in his instructions. I am to get you off-planet by any means necessary." Padme only stared back, and the droid continued. "The Dark Lord is gentle with you, but he's a formidable opponent, and I don't think we need to worry—"

"I'm not leaving him!" She roared and B2 backed up, while K5 let out a warble behind her, and Padme took a deep breath before lowering her voice. "I'm going to help him."

She turned to run toward the castle where Vader and Barriss fought, when B2 stopped her one more time.

"Mistress." She went toward the smaller box that still lay on the ground, untouched beside her gowns. "I think you'll be needing this."

B2 whipped off the curtain with a flourish, and pressed a button to open the box.

Inside lay gauntlets and headdresses, all pieces of her gowns that made the entire outfit complete.

But right on top lay the ELG-3A blaster pistol, complete with a long barrel, and scuff marks from the last time she used it. Like it was preserved with the utmost care, not touched or used once since her assumed death.

She picked it up and it fit perfectly in her hand, its edge smooth along her palm, her grip on its handle like it belonged there. Like the last two years didn't happen, and this was just another adventure, and she was going off to make a rescue. Like anything was possible.

"B2, if I don't make it—"

"Don't say that, Mistress."

Padme swallowed. "If I don't make it, I want you to know how grateful I am. For everything." Her articulation left much to be desired, but she hoped B2 could see the shine to

her eyes, hear the lump in her throat.

"Mistress, if you don't survive, and the Dark Lord does, I will not survive either. I was told to take you off-planet."

She laughed. "You're a good droid, B2."

Blaster in hand, Padme ran for the castle.

Her new master had warned her to be wary of Vader. To not underestimate him.

On the flight to Mustafar, Barriss took all of her energy, and all of the energy that surrounded her, and bent it to her whim, centering herself in her hate.

Her hate of the Jedi, of the Senate, of stupid women who allowed themselves to be captured by Darth Vader, of Darth Vader himself, of the life that was taken from her. When she looked in the mirror, her eyes flared yellow, and her heart burned hotter than all the lava of Mustafar.

Darth Vader was not the only master of hate.

And his hate wavered. Though he was strong and formidable, he was distracted. Off balance. He didn't feel her approach, and he was so busy bickering with his wife, he didn't see her until it was too late.

His wife. His wife that did not know she was his wife. Not only would she get the joy of defeating this lumbering maniac, she would get to have some fun with the both of them.

Despite the warnings from her new master, she wasn't afraid. Anakin Skywalker was more machine than man, his limbs were totally lost to him, along with all those midichlorians that the Jedi thought made him so *special*. Without all of that, what was he?

A fool in a mask, so thoroughly duped by Sheev Palpatine that he lost everything.

Killing him would almost be a mercy.

After he pushed away his pathetic wife and their little droids, Vader came for her.

He used strong steps and wide slashes of his saber. Less nimble than Anakin Skywalker, but stronger and more intimidating.

More intimidating to someone who wasn't prepared for him.

He used his size to gain ground, pushing them away from Senator Amidala and the droids. Fine — she could play his game. She was to take them both alive, anyway. After incapacitating the idiot, she could taunt him and his little wife for the entire flight back to Coruscant.

She allowed herself to lose ground, to let the big oaf get out all of his energy while she saved her own. He pushed her all the way to the castle, and she made no moves to attack, only threw up her lightsaber to block his slashes, with an occasional parry of her own. When they reached the threshold of the castle, it was all she could do not to laugh. The imposing

black castle with lava moats was so dramatic, and so self-pitying. A sad man burned alive, that kept himself ensconced in the very lava that destroyed his life.

To the galaxy, Darth Vader was a man with no weaknesses.

To Barriss Offee, Darth Vader was a sad fallen Jedi who never learned to control his emotions. Emotions that could be used against him.

Clearly growing frustrated, Vader shoved out a hand and a gust of wind hit her in the belly as she went flying into the castle. Her back hit the hard floor, and she rolled to her feet, keeping her blade up.

"Why did you come here if you don't want to fight?" Vader growled, the modulation making him sound like an irate droid.

"I came here to capture you for my new master," Barriss smiled and blocked another attack, now backing slowly up the stairs while Vader advanced. "And after we stop at Alderaan, we will have every Skywalker."

Vader paused for only a moment, and Barriss took her chance.

She slashed across his arm, and he let out a grunt, while wiring sparked underneath.

"This was always your destiny, from the moment the masters took a little slave boy from Tatooine. When Dooku took your arm, he was setting you on a path that you weren't strong enough to turn from."

Barriss was so caught up in her taunt, that she didn't notice Vader's other arm. The arm that she didn't spark with a lightsaber, lying in wait. It reached up and threw her across the castle with such a jolt that she nearly passed out.

No, no, this blustering fool will not take me.

She came back to her feet, slow and disoriented, as Vader descended upon her.

He didn't bother to run. No, Darth Vader doesn't run. He doesn't need to. If he walks in time with that imposing breath, it's enough to keep his enemy so scared, they stay rooted to their spot.

Barriss watched as the man, so separate, and so *not* the Anakin Skywalker she once knew, walked slowly toward her with his lightsaber at the ready.

Only a few steps away, there was an open hatchway door. Collecting herself, Barriss dashed for the corridor.

A long beam descended the length of the hallway, with fog rising up the sides, and large windows that overlooked the planet. She made her way down, not stopping to see if Vader quickened his pace. There had to be something here — a weapon or something she could use against him. If she could get him back outside, she could get him into the lava.

She skidded to a stop as a blaster bolt went flying past her ear. She didn't have the time to take out her lightsaber, she only had the barest of foresight gifted to her by the Force, that allowed her to duck.

The Senator came from around the corner, firing off blast after blast, her aim much too good for Barriss's comfort. Barriss sent every shot back and every single one missed the Senator, as she took cover behind walls.

The firing stopped when the Senator turned a corner, and Barriss released a breath.

But behind her, came another breath.

Vader slashed at her back, and Barriss fell to the floor, the first layer of skin turning molten while she still breathed. She scrambled, only to be kicked back down by Vader.

Another shot came from around the corner, and Barriss rolled out of its arc with less than a second to spare. She jumped to her feet, still disoriented from the crash and now with a burning pain on her back from the saber.

But Vader was no longer looking at her.

He was staring down the corridor, ignoring Barriss like she was nothing.

"I TOLD YOU TO GET ON THE SHIP!"

His voice thundered so loudly, the castle shook with it's might.

His entire body was unguarded.

But Barriss didn't allow herself fear. For she had barely a second while Vader was distracted. She pulled out her saber and slashed.

Vader let out a cry when Barris cut his mouthpiece. Her lightsaber slipped so casually across his face that it might have been an accident, but her smirk said differently. She wanted to cut his mask — she wanted to see the man underneath the machine, wanted to embarrass and humiliate him.

Padme barred her teeth and left cover to send another blast, that only went careening back as Barriss casually snapped and swished her lightsaber, like she was putting on a show. Like she no longer cared about her own injuries.

Vader kept his face to the ground, always obscuring the part that was cut away. And though Padme couldn't see what lay underneath, she could hear it.

The mouthpiece that would modulate his breath was cruelly cut away, and all that was left was the gasping of a man underneath who had no oxygen. He stood trapped between his enemy and the suit that kept him alive.

"Oh, Senator," that taunting sing-song voice carried down the hallway, and the rage that lay inside Padme's chest unfurled. Barriss meant to mock her. "My master wants you alive. Don't you want to come out and say good-bye to your little machine?"

One peak around the corner showed only a disarmed Vader, pieces of his suit and helmet strewn about the hallway, and Barriss flashing her evil smile down at him. The picture of victory, complete with the wide open windows of Mustafar behind her, the green sky lighting up the entire hallway. She was so *certain* that she had won.

Padme tightened her grip on the blaster handle. If she did nothing, Barriss would kill Vader. If she waited too long, Barriss wouldn't have to kill Vader, and he'd die from lack of life support. Vader was the galaxy's one chance at defeating the Emperor. *Her* one chance.

Keeping Vader alive by any means necessary was all that mattered.

And Barriss Offee, a woman who had the Jedi Temple bombed, a woman who pretended to be Ahsoka Tano's friend and framed her for the crime, this woman dares to stand there and mock her?

She let out a roar and flipped into the corridor, charged forward with her blaster firing off shots every second. Barriss casually blocked every shot with her lightsaber, but didn't send them back to Padme, didn't charge to meet her.

She was letting Padme come to her.

And Padme barely looked at her, because every step she took brought her closer to Vader, to the mouthpiece that was cut away, to the haggard breathing, to finally seeing what lay underneath the sleek black helmet that hid him from the world. She didn't look at Barriss, and she didn't see the pursed red lips, the cool arrogance of her eyes. She didn't see the freighter that hovered in the sky beyond, it's form moving ever closer to the window.

She didn't see the lightsaber that lifted in the air behind her, but she did see the black gloved hand that called it's weapon back home. She felt as a soft wind nudged her away, and the hilt went flying past where her head was.

And when the black hilt met the black glove, Vader took one last stand, slashing Barris across the waist.

Barriss let out a sickening cry, and with one last desperate swing of her saber, she cut the helmet once more, and every piece of it went tumbling to the ground.

A large gash bisected Vader's head like a bleeding red menace. His scratched maskless breathing filled the space of the corridor, and when he finally looked up, bright yellow eyes turned to a soft blue that she only saw in her dreams.

His face was so heavily scarred that she almost wouldn't have seen it. But his eyes, the same blue as the Naboo sky, his lips, scarred but the same shape, and the way he looked at her... He looked at her like nothing else in the world was happening, like he didn't just lose his life support, like no one was there to kill them. He looked at her like no time at all had passed, and it was just a husband and wife and no one else in the world.

She was so distracted by him. By the blue eyes shining back at her, the blue eyes that she thought had been gone forever. The scars that lined his face meaning absolutely nothing, because underneath the scars, underneath the years of pain, underneath the black mask of Darth Vader was her husband. Barriss was no longer there, they weren't even on Mustafar anymore, it was just Padme and Anakin, staring across the stars.

Her chin trembled with the rest of her body and she fell to her knees before she could take even a step closer. She didn't care about the rest of the world, she didn't care about the lightsaber that moved closer, she only cared that she was her and he was him, and they were both here. They both had been here this entire time.

She didn't notice the lightsaber that moved to strike. She didn't even see the ship that hovered in the background with a team of droids at the controls, and a server droid at the guns.

The roaring behind her ears meant nothing until she saw the scarred lips that moved, that were saying *her* name, and with the mouthpiece gone, it wasn't the sound of a rasping machine, it was her husband. Saying her name.

She crawled closer towards him, and finally the world came back around her.

“GET ON THE SHIP, PADME!”

Her voice choked and she ignored his pleas. “I won’t leave you.”

“*Yes you will* , get on the ship before it’s too late!”

Padme lifted a hand to touch her husband, to make sure he was real, to make sure he wouldn’t fade away before she reached him like he always did in her dreams.

Her fingers trembled only inches away from his face, from his beautiful face, when a hot red blast sent them flying in opposite directions.

In a smoking husk in between them lay the burned up body of Barriss Offee.

And behind her, hovering with the freighter precariously close to the castle, a still-smoking blast with a team of droids whirring and cheering in the cockpit.

Anakin lifted his head for only one second, the non-obscured half of his face totally dazed — whether it was from losing life support, being hit by the blast, or seeing his droid team shoot lasers into the castle, Padme could not have said.

“Lord Vader,” B2’s casual voice sounded through the intercom, and Anakin propped himself up on one elbow, as if trying to listen. “I really hated that woman.”

Padme and Anakin locked eyes, and despite everything that had happened, all the death, destruction, the lies, everything that was discovered that day — they looked at each other and laughed.

Laughed like they were still without any cares, like they were just married on Naboo and had no worries in the world besides making each other happy.

They laughed, and then Anakin, the lights on his chest piece flickering out one by one, fell onto the floor in a heap. No noise came from his voice modulator.

“Anakin?” She whispered, still lying on the ground. When her husband made no move, no acknowledgement, she hopped to her feet in one swift motion. “ANAKIN?”

Her slippers slid across the floor, and she hopped unceremoniously over Barriss, before finally reaching her husband. She grabbed one of his hands, and touched a cheek, and the lump in her throat grew when he didn’t fade. He was real.

But he was dying.

“FX!” She cried, whipping around to the freighter without letting go of her husband’s hand. “FX, we need your help!”

The freighter disappeared into the landscape and Padme looked down the halls of Fortress Vader, desperate for any person to appear and help her, to tell her that everything would be okay.

And the only person she was ever comfortable enough to ask for help lay at her feet, unconscious, limbs burned to ash, encased in a suit that was meant to breathe for him. Even after surviving everything, he might now die because of a broken mouthpiece.

She threw her arms underneath his own, and with all of her strength, hauled him to his feet. Grumbling and struggling to catch her breath, all Padme could think was that she never realized that Anakin was this *heavy*. Unable to hold him upright, she dragged him down the corridor, his legs inelegantly splayed out in front of them while she pulled them backwards until she reached the hidden room of the West Sector. The room with the bacta tank.

She pulled Anakin to his feet, and rested him in a chair beside the bacta tank. She saw his egg, the one she had feared so deeply the last time she was in this room. Now it all seemed so silly. The entire time, it was Anakin in the egg. Anakin who captured her from the prison. Anakin who fought a roggwart and healed her wounds. Anakin who gave her the stars and comforted her.

How could I have been so stupid?

Everything from her time at Fortress Vader went racing through her mind. The way he lingered by her side. The way he tenderly touched her scars. The way he wrapped her up in his cape and carried her back to the castle. Every bit of him, even his touch and the way he tilted his head, was so obviously Anakin.

It was all staring her right in the face, and she was too — too what? Depressed? Stupid? — to see it. But she knew herself. She knew that Padme Amidala was *not* stupid.

So how could she have been so oblivious?

She rested her back against the far wall and slowly lowered herself to the floor until she was crouched down, staring up at him.

Anakin's eyelashes were gone. Melted skin where his eyebrows once were. His hair — his beautiful, wavy hair, soft and chestnut, thick locks that she would run her fingers through — gone. Only a scarred head remained in its place.

He was burned alive and had his life cruelly extended, probably writhing and screaming in pain as he felt his body turn to ash. She took a shuddering breath, swallowing the sobs that threatened, before looking back up at her husband.

He survived. She survived.

And they found each other.

FX-6 came bursting into the room at top speed, throwing his extremities into the air as he set up the bacta tank.

She helped the droid set Anakin up to be lowered into the bacta, and when her husband's vital signs came alive and he was securely encased, she turned back to the egg.

And behind it, the open hatchway door. A blank wall stared back at her with a silhouette of a rectangle surrounded by two years of dust and grime. Where he stored her dresses.

Padme took slow steps into the room, and gasped.

Hanging across from the dresses sat a large portrait of Queen Amidala. Her regal face stared back, and Padme reached out to touch the portrait. It felt like a different lifetime; like a totally different person who ruled Naboo at age 14. Who was convinced to take the position in the first place by one of her most trusted mentors, Sheev Palpatine.

B2 came bustling in.

"The Dark Lord has never let us in this room before. Not even to clean."

Padme smiled at the droid. "B2..." Tears pinched at Padme's eyes and she wiped them away with a smile.

"Don't cry, mistress, he will be fine. I know FX is a little abrasive, but he can fix up anybody."

She reached out and rested her hands on the shoulders of her friend.

"They're..." She stopped. Were they happy tears? Anakin was alive, but he... he destroyed the Temple. Killed Jedi. *Killed younglings*. He killed countless more innocent people under the reign of Palpatine. He stood by a fascist, despite everything she ever stood and fought for. And he lied to her. "Thank you for taking care of Barriss, B2. I owe you my life."

B2 backed out of the room, and called, "You owe me nothing. Believe me, it was my pleasure."

Padme took one last look at the portrait of a queen, at *her* portrait, and went to wait for the bacta treatment to finish. She stared at the peaceful picture of her husband, a man ravaged by fire, a man who donned the black suit, that now sat in total tranquility. Tranquility that would be disturbed the moment he woke up. Tranquility that was *robbed* from them.

Palpatine did this. Palpatine took him when he was a child, and groomed him to be his apprentice. The same way he groomed *her* to believe and trust in him. Palpatine created Darth Vader, and entombed Anakin as a shrine to his own schemes.

What did Barriss say? That Palpatine sent her. That he wanted Padme alive.

And she would give him exactly what he wanted.

Chapter 11

Plotting against Palpatine was never something Padme thought she'd be doing — either when she was his protegee in the Senate, or after he took the Republic and twisted it into the Galactic Empire. Despite everything he did, all the ways he ruined her life, she never thought she would. Never thought she could.

But now...

Now she knew what he did to Anakin. She knew what he had been doing to Anakin for fifteen years. And she did not have the Force. She had no defense. She spent her career doing his bidding while he tore apart the Republic from the inside out. He orchestrated the Clone Wars, playing both sides against each other, planning for every single contingency. He likely planned for the contingency of Barriss being defeated.

And he knew that she was alive. And as long as she was alive, as long as she was Padme Amidala, she would never rest. Even if it actually killed her this time, she would fight. To save the Republic. To save Anakin. To save the world that her children would grow up in. To save herself. By any means necessary.

And even if he killed her, even if he broke her down in the most humiliating defeat in the history of the galaxy, she would no longer sit back and not fight. And if all went according to plan, he would die knowing that he failed to contend with Padme Amidala and Anakin Skywalker. Together.

“FX,” She called to the droid, while looking up at Anakin as he slowly healed in the bacta tank. If this was the Anakin she knew, he’d never approve of this plan. Which was why she had to set it up while he was under. “What does Anakin need to survive?”

The droids all lined up, and only looked back and forth at each other, before B2 finally answered.

“Sorry, Mistress. Anakin?”

She opened her mouth then closed it. Looking from droid to droid, before her eyes finally landed on her husband in the bacta tank.

“Vader.” The name seemed too dark, too imposing for the vulnerable man in the bacta.

It was the last thing she wanted was to call her husband — his Sith name, the name that was given to him by Sheev Palpatine.

But he *was* Darth Vader. And as much as she might have liked to deny it, she had feelings for Vader before she knew he was Anakin. Was it right to erase that part of him? The past two years that would be forever shrouded in darkness? She loved Anakin. And if he was Vader, then she loved him just the same. Because even before the helmet came off, she felt what was true underneath. To the galaxy he was only a machine, but underneath all of that was a truly human, beating heart. And she would take his scars with his heart, and love him on purpose.

She had decided all of that years ago — the day she married him on Naboo.

FX-6 beeped and pointed, while B2 translated for him.

"FX says the Dark Lord has medical equipment that keep him alive." Ignoring the bleak truth that Anakin would be on life support for as long as he lived, she could only roll her eyes at the use of the title *Dark Lord*. Anakin always was one for the dramatics. "At bare minimum, he will need his pressurized meditation chamber, bacta tank, back-up suit and helmet, and his chest piece must stay attached at all times."

She nodded. "Okay, well let's start bringing what we can out to the ship."

The droids stayed glued to their spots.

"Mistress," B2 said. "Is the Dark Lord... leaving the castle?"

"We are *all* leaving the castle, B2, and this fiery planet."

The droids paused before scurrying off in other directions, and B2 instructed RJ, K5, and Spat to go find a crane.

"Why do we need a crane, B2?"

The droid pointed at the egg. "Lord Vader's meditation chamber. We can't lift it ourselves. I'm not even sure he could."

Padme went to the egg and laid a gentle hand atop it. Though it was encased in a hard outer shell, a sort of power and energy thrummed through it. Like holding a Jedi lightsaber, but somehow... stronger.

She pulled her hand away. "Meditation chamber?" She wondered aloud, not really expecting an answer.

B2 came up beside her. "The Dark Lord goes in there when he doesn't wish to be disturbed. FX says it's a life support chamber."

That piqued her interest. "Life support?"

"Yes, Mistress. It's the only place where he doesn't need to wear the helmet or suit."

While the droids went off to find a crane, Padme ran her hand over the egg again. So there were options. Anakin didn't have to choose between death or Darth Vader. Palpatine just chose the most painful option for the sole purpose of cruelty.

Padme busied herself with preparing everything for her plan. She took what she could from the castle and helped the droids pack it into the freighter. She helped FX gather Anakin's medical supplies (after a bunch of bickering with the droid, who was convinced they'd all be turned to scrap for acting without Vader's permission), and after hours of scouring the castle for everything they'd need, and going over her plan again and again, she went back to the West Sector.

In the center of the room, in front of the empty bacta tank, there he was.

Anakin.

The black suit was restored, the lights on the chest piece flared to life once again. The replacement black helmet sat on the far counter, and it was just Anakin. His head was covered in scars, his face mottled with burn marks, but it was still him. The way he stood, the way he listened to FX, the way he slowly upturned his head at her approach, like he knew she was coming.

He always knew when she was coming.

And even though there were two years between them, two years of Imperial terror and anonymous poverty, two years of mourning, weeks of living in this castle under false pretenses and lies, weeks of broken windows and stargazing, all she cared about was him. Anakin. That he was alive and she was alive, and they were *them*, and for one moment they were just a man and just a woman. He was never a Jedi and he never fell. She wasn't a Senator and she never faked her own death. They were just them.

And they had been apart for two years.

"Ani," she whispered, and the name was both foreign and comfortable on her lips. A name that she had once spoken all the time, a name that she had expected to be saying for the rest of her life. A name that she would grow old with. A name that was innocent and soft, juxtaposed next to the heavy menace of *Darth Vader*. She said it again, just to revel in the fact that she could say it again, that she could keep saying it for as long as she wanted. "Ani."

His eyes met hers and they held each other in their gaze for a couple of breaths, before Anakin finally spoke with his own voice.

"Padme."

He was uninhibited by a mouthpiece, and though he was strained, it was him. His voice. Not dead, and not hidden under a mask and modulator.

Before she could react, Anakin was moving toward her. Totally sure in his steps, and when their bodies collided into each other, he swept her into his arms, cradling her head in his hand, and brought their lips together.

His hand moved through her hair, and she ran her fingertips down his jawline, thrilling in the feeling of his lips on hers, lips that she thought were lost to her forever, of his arms that circled around her body and pulled her off her feet. Padme clung to him, snaking her legs around his waist, and with her eyes closed and their bodies together, all the time in the galaxy slipped away and they were in her apartment on Coruscant. They were in her office in the Senate building. They were on Naboo, discovering each other's bodies, but this time it was muscle memory that took over, and she opened her mouth as his tongue touched her lips, and ran her hands along his neck and shoulders when he moved her against the wall..

When he pulled her waist closer, she arched her back. When he ran his hands down her body, she ran hers along his, both the same and incredibly different, and she wanted to discover him all over again. They danced and moved together and there wasn't a part of her that didn't love his weight pressed against her, and just when she thought to move her hands lower, Anakin pulled away and threw his head down as coughs raked through his body. The scratching of his breath filled her ears, and this time it was real lungs, not a manufactured voice box that spoke for him, and it was so incredibly human and fragile.

"Ani," she said the name again as she put her feet back on the ground, but held on to him as the panic in her voice increased and tension ran along her entire body. "Ani, are you okay?"

As if on cue, FX-6 came rushing over, his arms filled with medical supplies, and when he threw one at them, Anakin snatched it from the air and brought it down to his mouth.

A more steady, controlled breathing filled the room. Though he was not wearing the mask, his mouth was covered by a big filtered piece that mimicked the one on Vader's helmet, and the face of her husband was again obscured.

Anakin let go of her with a squeeze on her waist, and he finally took in the room surrounding him, clearly noting the empty space where his egg used to be.

"FX," The soft voice of Ani took on the commanding presence of Vader. "FX, where is my meditation chamber?" He threw a look in her direction, like he knew exactly what the answer would be.

FX-6 spoke in binary, thrusting his arms into the air and pointing all over the room, until he landed on Padme. His beeps grew notably more aggressive and the way he pointed at her could only be described as accusatory. She composed herself, crossing her arms and lifting her chin, daring any person, human or droid, to question her decision.

After listening to the droid's entire diatribe, Anakin turned and came back to her. He lifted his hands, like he meant to touch her face, to hold and caress her like he used to, but after staring at the gloveless wiring, he brought them back down and stood with his hands hanging awkwardly at his sides, like he no longer knew what to do with them.

She reached out and grabbed them, not caring if they were wires and machinery, only caring that they were attached to him.

"Padme," his voice was less strained, but slightly more controlled and modulated with the mouthpiece on. The commanding presence of Vader gone like a flash of light. "FX claims you stole my meditation chamber."

She narrowed her eyes at the droid before turning back to Anakin.

"I didn't *steal* your meditation chamber, Ani. Obviously. I told the droids to bring it to the ship."

Anakin stopped and blinked, but grasped her tighter.

"Why does my meditation chamber need to be on the ship?"

Padme took a deep breath. If she knew Anakin — and she was certain she still did — he would not like any of this. And he'd try to stop it. "There's been a change of plans. I'm not leaving this planet alone. We're going together and we're going to Coruscant."

"CORUSCANT?!" Anakin dropped her hands and threw his own into the air. "Padme, we cannot *go* to Coruscant, the Emperor sent Barriss here to capture you. He knows you're alive, and he probably wants to correct that."

"Barriss was here to capture you too, and I can't imagine *the Emperor*," she said the title with obvious disdain. "Will be happy with you for keeping me here behind his back."

Anakin shook his head. "That doesn't mean you need to risk yourself. I can handle the Emperor —"

"*So can I!* You took me from the prison ship and lied to me about who you are because you thought I needed protecting, but I don't. I've spent two years doing nothing. It's time for me to do something. It's time for *us* to do something." She laid a hand on his shoulder, and he nearly shuddered at the touch. "Together."

Anakin sighed, and looked down at her hand. "He is not the Chancellor Palpatine you remember from the Senate, or Naboo. You don't know what he's capable of." He snapped his head when the droid team came rolling into the room, collecting more medical boxes from FX to bring out to the ship. He opened his mouth to protest, and Padme interrupted.

"Don't patronize me, Anakin. I'm going to Coruscant, with or without you." She took a step closer and narrowed her eyes, daring him to question her. "And there's *nothing* you can do to stop me."

He looked away from the droids, who scurried out the moment he turned his back. "You can't —"

"What was your plan anyway?" She questioned him. "To send me to some remote planet for the rest of my life, while you do what? Continue serving the Empire?"

She almost didn't want to know the answer. Even before she knew he was Anakin, when he was just Darth Vader, the thought of him sending her away, and returning to his work as Palpatine's second in command... The thought made her sick. Did he plan to go on like before? Like she never existed? Like he could just put her on a ship and then she'd disappear?

He pulled on her hands, and led her to the stool that sat behind the bacta tank. FX-6 stood and stared at them, before Anakin gestured for the droid to leave. "The Emperor called me two days ago and said that he was sending some kind of... test for me. He must have found out about you and wanted to either kill you or capture you. Since neither of those is ever going to happen... I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to send you away, Padme. That was the last thing I wanted. Having you here... It was like I could finally breathe again."

Though his words nearly melted her on the spot, and the overwhelming desire to touch him again... There was another question. A question that gnawed at her since the moment Barriss slashed his helmet open.

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

He dropped his head low, and all she could see of her husband was the deep groove that cut across his skull.

"I figured you'd know. When you saw the dresses."

She nodded, and looked back at the private room. The room he sequestered off, the room that he built as a memorial shrine... to her.

"Padme, I need you to know," Anakin's voice grew thick, and he grabbed onto her, finally looking her in the eyes. "If I never found you, if you... If you really did die. I never would have stopped trying. I would have spent the rest of my life looking for you. I don't care about

the Empire or the Sith. *Everything* is for you. I woke up every day in agony, and I did it to find you. And now that I have, I can't let you die. Not again."

She reached to caress his face again, to outline the scars and burns that made him human, the proof he was more than a machine of the Empire. "I'm sorry, Anakin, but I'm not asking. You made your choices. Now I need you to listen to mine."

"*Choose?*" His eyes grew in size, and he strained his voice through the mouthpiece. "You think I *chose* all of this?"

The desperation that seeped through him twisted and clutched at her heart, but Padme continued. "I have no idea. Up until a few hours ago, I thought you were dead. All I know is that you've been stalking around the galaxy for two years, doing Palpatine's bidding, and enforcing a fascist regime!" The outburst surprised even her, and it was something she hadn't realized she'd been carrying until that exact moment. Her entire life was dedicated to liberty. And serving the Empire was deeper than disrespect; it was a slap in the face to her entire life.

Anakin's eyes turned serious. "The Republic was corrupt, it needed to fall —"

"Listen to yourself! The Republic was far from perfect, but it was a democracy, one that valued freedom —"

"The Republic stopped being a democracy that valued freedom the day Palpatine was elected Chancellor, and you know it."

She dropped his hands and came to her feet, storming across the room. The shame of it burned her. She should have *seen*, she should have *suspected*, and the knowledge that she implicitly trusted Palpatine was guilt that she'd carry for the rest of her life — however long that was.

She looked at the sleek medical equipment. The chrome lines, the impersonality that surrounded the entire castle, the replacement helmet that sat tauntingly on the counter, just waiting to cover his eyes again. "So you become a Sith Lord and rule an Empire?! What about everything I spent my life working for — everything you fought a war to defend?! Don't you *care* about any of it?!" Her voice cracked and her eyes burned in the corners, while she furiously wiped away any trace of tears. She would *not* cry.

"Padme," His eyes pleaded with her, absolutely piercing with everything else on his perfect face burned away. "I care about *you*. I became a Sith Lord to protect you. Palpatine told me he had a way to save you, but he lied ."

She let out of a mirthless laugh. "I didn't need to be saved by Palpatine. 'I survived. Look at how far you went... To protect me. Look at the things you've done.' The things he did *before* the lava burned him alive, *before* the mask went down and locked him in. She spent two years trying not to think of it, the word *younlings* always lying in the back of her mind." The things that Obi-Wan said you did —"

"OBI-WAN?!" Anakin shot to his feet, and the familiar anger returned. "You mention OBI-WAN?!"

The space between them hung in the air like something tangible, and the heavy weight in Padme's chest hardened. After all this time, after everything they went through, he *still*

harbored anger for his old Master. Padme's own feelings toward Obi-Wan were something she grappled with; he left Anakin to die an excruciating death on Mustafar.

But there was no one in the world she would have trusted more to watch over her son.

And Anakin... Anakin scorched the galaxy to keep her safe. He just might repair it to keep his children safe.

"There's something you should know... About Obi-Wan." Her voice softened the hard edges of his face, and he took another step closer. "I'm not the only one who survived childbirth, Ani."

His eyes shined, and for a single moment, all else stripped away, and he was hopeful. Only hopeful. "The baby?" He choked out the words, and his real voice came through the modulator.

"Babies. We had twins. A boy and a girl — Luke and Leia." She smiled sadly and her entire chest felt like it would burst just at their names. They deserved better lives, they deserved a galaxy that was free. That was just. They deserved to be happy for every minute of every day, even if that meant they'd have to do it without her. She'd die for that. She'd kill for it. "Luke is with Obi-Wan, and Leia —"

"Is on Alderaan." It wasn't a question. He knew for certain, and Padme stood stricken. If he knew as Darth Vader, who else knew?

"How did you know?" She snapped.

All the anger over Obi-Wan drained from his face, and was replaced with a kind of overwhelming exhaustion, as he sat back on the stool and dropped his head into his hands. "Barriss said after she captured us, she would go to Alderaan and have 'every Skywalker'. I didn't know what she meant at the time."

Her blood stopped running. Barriss knew about her daughter. She knew about her daughter, and she was sent on this mission by Palpatine himself. They planned to *kidnap* her daughter.

The lava that burned the entire awful planet of Mustafar was nothing next to the fury of Padme, when she realized that the man who wished to harm her daughter was still existing in his cushy throne on Coruscant.

"Anakin." Padme rushed back and kneeled in front of him, taking his face in her hands again. She *had* to make him understand. "If Barriss knows..."

"Then Palpatine knows." His voice turned to stone, and for the first time, she liked it. She loved Anakin, and she'd do anything to keep him by her side. But at that moment... She needed Darth Vader.

"Do you understand now, Ani? We can't do nothing. We've done nothing for too long. We need to save our babies."

"I know." He stroked his hands in her hair, and did nothing to stop the tears that welled in his eyes and fell down his cheeks. "I just... I can kill him without you there. You can still get away. You can take B2 to Alderaan, and I can take care of the Emperor. I will... I'll die fighting him, but that's okay if you and the babies are safe. It's too late for me."

Padme laid her forehead against his, and looked into his eyes while they both cried together, neither feeling shame, only the comfort of sharing their agony, the joy of being alive, and the dread of what was to come.

"If it's too late for you, it's too late for me."

Before he could say anything, before he could argue, she pressed her lips gently to his. He paused, but finally took her by the waist and kissed her back, gently holding her in his arms, and she held onto his face, wiping both of their tears away, while tracing his scars with her thumb.

"Mistress." They broke apart when they heard the droids come into the room, but kept their arms around each other. "The ship is ready. K5 needs to know the coordinates for the navicomputer."

Anakin closed his eyes and nodded against her head.

"We're going to Coruscant."

Chapter 12

The blurred lines of hyperspace filled the viewport while Padme and Anakin sat at the controls. Neither said anything, and Anakin fiddled with the console.

"I'm sure the ship is fine," Padme said, wishing that he would stop playing with machines for one moment. "You can do whatever you want with it after we leave Coruscant."

The optimism sounded fake even to her own ears, but it was all she had.

He shot her a look. "I'm taking it off the grid". He stood. "For when we approach my flagship. It's a trick smugglers and bounty hunters use, so their serial numbers aren't clocked by Imperials."

She took a deep breath, not knowing which item to react to first. The fact that he knows how to perform old smuggler tricks, his "personal flagship", the fact that he *was* an Imperial, or the very real risk of approaching an Imperial ship in the first place.

"What if they just fire on us? Isn't that what you would do?"

Anakin cocked his head to the side, as if he really had to think about it.

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm on this ship and not that one." Padme deadpanned back, clearly not at all comforted by the fact. He stopped fiddling with the machine and looked at her. "Trust me, if they fire on us they will live to regret it."

Although the bleak statement shouldn't have made her feel better, she laughed. It was such an... *Anakin* thing to say. Now that she looked back on her time at Fortress Vader, nearly everything he said was an Anakin thing to say. It was just far more menacing and much less playful when filtered through a voice box and black helmet.

"How long until we get to Coruscant?" Every inch of Padme was shaking with nerves at what they were about to do. She had to admit, she didn't think too deeply about this plan before jumping right into it; even calling it a plan was a bit of a stretch. She decided she wanted Palpatine dead, and that Anakin was the only person who had a chance of achieving that.

And that she wanted to be there when the last bit of life left his eyes.

"Only a few moments until we reach the flagship." Anakin still played with the console. 'After that, a few hours until Coruscant.' He paused before looking up. "You know, it's not too late. You and the droids can still leave after I get my shuttle. The Emperor won't fall for this."

She leveled him with a stare. They were not returning to this discussion. If Palpatine was to die, she would stand witness to it.

And if the outcome is anything else... Well, she'd stand witness to that too. And face the consequences. She was done hiding.

"Okay, okay," Anakin held up his hands in surrender. "I'm certainly not going to argue with you."

She raised her eyebrows. "I know you're not."

A shadow of a smile played on his lips, and she nearly laughed at how easily they fell back into their patterns. He moved toward the door. "We're approaching the jump. I'm going to get the helmet."

The meditation chamber sat just beyond the cockpit, and Anakin approached it without closing the door behind him. He laid a hand on the top of the egg, and it cracked apart, revealing a white interior, and the Darth Vader helmet that hung at the top, waiting to descend.

Anakin closed his eyes before sitting inside, and pressed a button. She watched as everything about him was swallowed by the black helmet, which nestled perfectly over his head and locked onto the mouthpiece below. He took two black gloves that hung from a hook inside of the chamber and slipped them on slowly, like he was lining them up perfectly so all wiring was tucked neatly inside the suit.

As Darth Vader, Anakin could afford no weaknesses.

When the egg opened again, Darth Vader stepped in front of her. He looked taller with the helmet, and the width of his shoulders filled the doorway. She couldn't help but notice that the lightsaber sat hooked comfortably on his belt, and he looked all the same as he did when he crept into her cell on the prison ship. His cape swished behind him, and Padme took a shuddering breath when he stood beside her and gently rested a hand on her shoulder.

She could see the outline of his blue eyes through the mask, and she wondered if she always could... If somewhere, in the back of her mind, she always knew whose eyes lay behind the black orbs.

"Welcome back, Lord Vader." Her voice came out more strained than she intended, but she held his gaze while the blurred lines jumped into stars.

"Funny." The modulated voice came back, but this time, she could hear him underneath. His exact incantations, his speech patterns, the way his voice softened whenever he spoke to her. Palpatine tried to take all of that away, tried to erase Anakin Skywalker, and he failed.

Just like he would fail again.

They hovered in space, just the two of them staring back at each other. They didn't even turn their heads when the Star Destroyer filled the viewport. Padme laid a hand on his chest armor and leaned in, only to be snapped out of their reverie when the communications console beeped.

"Unidentified freighter, please state your intention. This is a flagship of the Galactic Empire, and you have illegally scrambled your serial number. You have 10 seconds to respond."

Vader sighed and tilted his head before pulling away from her, like the threat of death was just another nuisance for him to handle so he could be alone with his wife.

He went to the console microphone, and pulled her to stand beside him. "Watch this." He whispered, before finally pressing the button to engage contact.

He breathed into the console, each steady and unnaturally paced, like he was making the scratching even more dreadful. Padme furrowed her brow in question, when the Commander scrambled on the other end.

"Lord Vader?" All his earlier confidence shot down, and panic laced every word. "Is that you?"

"Hello Commander." Anakin stopped the breathing and finally spoke, while Padme couldn't help but stifle a laugh. "For your sake, I hope you're not planning to fire on me."

"Not at all!" The Commander snapped, obviously hoping to clear up any miscommunications. "I do apologize, my Lord, I didn't know it was you. We haven't seen you in weeks, we weren't certain when you would return."

Fear laced the commander's every word. He breathed heavily and stuttered when he spoke, and he was most certainly sweating beneath his Imperial uniform.

"Have my shuttle prepared and waiting in the hangar when I arrive." Vader continued as if the commander wasn't fearing for his life. "I will be leaving immediately."

"Yes, Lord Vader."

"And Commander?"

Silence passed for a beat, and the commander audibly swallowed.

"Yes?"

"If you or your men wish to live a long life, the hangar bay will be empty when I arrive."

Another swallow. "Yes, Lord Vader." The commander eked out, before Anakin shut down the console.

Anakin looked down at the ship's controls, and navigated it on course to the hangar bay of the Destroyer. Padme hovered closely behind his back, one hand resting on the chair. She had been on the receiving end of many threatening calls in her tenure as Republic Senator, but never on the other side. Never the side delivering the threat of death to relative innocents. As innocent as a Commander for the Galactic Empire could be.

When they closely approached the hangar, Anakin stood to his full height again, so tall that Padme had to look up to see him.

"Ani?" She said, grabbing onto his elbow before he could stalk away. He turned his head down in silent question. "Would you really have killed that commander?"

Anakin did not hesitate.

"Yes." She opened her mouth to argue, and he continued. "If he was on the hangar bay when I arrived, he might have seen you through the viewport. If he used the guns on that Destroyer to fire on this ship, it would have killed you."

He moved his hands to her shoulders, and lowered himself so they were at the same height. In a calm voice, he continued. “I will kill anyone who even thinks about hurting you. Even if it’s an accident. Without question. Without mercy. As long as I am alive, no harm will come to you again.”

Before she could respond, Anakin turned to the controls, and navigated the freighters landing onto the hangar bay, before stalking off of the ship and onto the Star Destroyer.

The walls of the hangar bay looked similar to the Republic’s warships. The same cold, grey walls. Impeccable floors, not a scuff mark in sight despite being the site of unspeakable violence.

As promised by the commander, the hangar bay was empty save for a single Lambda Class shuttle, a gray so dark and sleek that it may as well have been black. And when Anakin — Darth Vader — descended from the freighters ramp and stomped across that perfect scuff-free floor, his helmet matching all that perfect chrome, he looked exactly like he belonged there.

Padme fell into the pilots seat and rested her head in her hands.

In the best possible outcome, an outcome where Anakin and Padme went into Palpatine’s throne room, killed him and survived, the next logical step would be Vader’s immediate seizure and imprisonment. Bail and Mon would never stand for a reformed Republic where the right hand of Palpatine walked the galaxy a free man. Even if he was her husband. Even if he was the father of Bail’s adopted daughter. Even if Padme loved him.

They’d never let him go free. And if they did, the citizens of the galaxy would rise against him.

After all was said and done, Darth Vader would have three options: prison, exile, or execution.

But he knew that. He knew that, and he still agreed to go with her.

Her throat caught when she watched him board the shuttle. She sniffled when she worked the controls to attach the two ships together. Her hands shook when she tapped the coordinates for Coruscant into the navicomputer. And when the ships locked on, she stood, wiped her eyes, and held her chin up.

She was Padme Naberrie Amidala, Queen of Naboo, Representative of the Republic Senate, wife of Anakin Skywalker, and mother to Luke and Leia. She fought in the battle of Geonosis, saved her home from an invasion at age 14, fought the Clone Wars on and off the battlefield, and lived two years by herself, not using her own name, with a gaping black hole in her heart where she stored everything she lost. *No one* would tell her she couldn’t be with the man she loved. *No one*.

When the hatch opened, Padme stalked across and came into the cockpit of the Imperial shuttle to find Anakin standing there, still in his suit, tapping buttons on the console.

She laid a hand on the back of his seat, no longer gentle, and whipped it around to face her. He raised his hands up, as if to prove his innocence, and Padme straddled his chair, wrapping her legs around his waist, and taking his hands and putting them on her hips.

"What?" Anakin whispered, but he made no move to stop her, didn't move when she ran her hands up his arms and down his chest, didn't stop himself from pressing his thumbs into her hips and running his fingers across her legs.

"Wait." He pulled his lightsaber, which hung dangerously close to Padme's leg, off of his belt and placed it on the console.

With the weapon out of their way, she fingered the bottom of his helmet. "Can I take this off?"

Breath. "Yes."

He guided her hands to the latch that hooked the helmet to the mask. Padme pulled it off, and ran her fingers across his head, finding the latch that would unhook the mask. When she pulled it off, a hiss of air revealed his blue eyes staring back at her.

One hand traced the features of his face, the other slipped underneath his chest armor, and pulled at the thick fabric underneath.

"Back in the castle, when we kissed." She put her lips right against his ears. "Was that the first time your skin has been touched since Mustafar?"

His chest trembled under her touch, and he nodded in a barely discernible confirmation. She brought her lips to the burn mark that nearly scorched his eye, and she trailed his lips along it, while her hand pushed up on the chest armor, releasing it from its lock. Another hiss of air when it detached. He was preserved like a piece of meat that might go rotten, being used as a vessel of power and strength, all to glorify someone else.

The chain that hooked the cape lay over the unattached armor. She unfastened it and removed the chain, the armor, and the cape, never removing her lips from the scars, drawing lines around them with her touch. His breathing grew heavier. His hands lingered on her hips, slowly grazing upward, tracing the lines of her back until he reached her shoulders. He rested them there for a beat before moving up to his own face and removing the last piece of his mask; the mouthpiece.

His lips touched hers with a searing ferocity, and with the mouthpiece removed she could expose his neck and run her hands along the lines of his shoulders, while he kept his hands firmly on her waist, bringing her in closer, and she wrapped her legs tighter around him. Their tongues rediscovered each other, and Anakin took hers in his mouth and lightly sucked, emitting a small laughing moan from Padme. She went to do the same to him, when he pulled away, bringing the mouthpiece back to his lips and the mechanical breath filled the space between them.

Padme remained undeterred, only bringing her lips to the skin where his neck met his shoulders, sucking on that instead. She brought her lips up to his ears, putting the earlobe in her mouth, whispering in between licks. "You can keep the helmet on. It doesn't bother me."

He stopped, pulling her off of him, and lowered his gaze. He did not look her in the eye as he spoke.

"Padme, I... I can't walk on my own. I can't breathe on my own." He lifted his hands to cup her face, and her breath caught in her throat. "How can I make love to you? I'm only going to hurt you."

She ran a finger down his cheek. "I'm not afraid of being hurt." She pulled his face so he looked her in the eye. "I'm afraid of never touching you again."

His eyes pinned her in place, and stood with her legs still wrapped around his body. One hand held her up, and the other cradled her head while he dipped her down, ripped off the mouthpiece and left her with another kiss before putting it back on..

With one hand under her back side, he carried her out of the shuttle and back onto the freighter. He walked like she weighed absolutely nothing, carrying her with ease of one arm, while the other hand pushed up underneath her tunic, every part of her sparking with his touch, her blood flowing like a dam about to break.

Once inside the freighter, apparently tired of waiting, Anakin threw her against a wall and nestled in between her legs. She pulled at the thick cumbersome fabric of his suit, pulled it down until all that remained was the black box attached to his chest, with gleaming yet scarred skin over muscles that had one grown harder since she last touched them. She rubbed at the tight knots of his shoulders, and he buried his head into her neck, inhaling her skin like its scent was all that kept him alive, while his hands roamed up her back.

He finally moved to the front, over her tunic. His fingers trailed up her body, resting on her collarbone, outlining every bump and crevice with exacting detail. He rubbed the fabric of her collar between thumb and forefinger, before moving his head to look her in the eyes.

He ripped the shirt down the middle with one flick of the wrist.

Padme laughed and threw her arms around him again, loving every point of their skin that touched, and hating everything that still lay between them.

Unwrapping herself from his waist, she planted her feet on the ground, and moved her hands down to the heavy black belt, hovering her fingers just above the skin, so light they were barely touching. She pulled at the belt hooks, and Anakin's breath hitched.

"Padme." He breathed, resting his hands on her shoulders. "I'm not..."

She did not stop her exploration. Her lips grazed his chest, and she pulled on the hooks of the belt. "Not what?"

His cheeks flamed red, even redder than the scars that mottled them, and he drifted his eyes away. "Not what I used to be."

She stopped and thought of Anakin. Anakin before the fall of the Republic. The chest armor that he wore over his Jedi robes, that she would always push off his shoulders when he got home. The metal hand that she held in her own. His big blue eyes that were hard for the rest of the world, but turned soft when he looked at her. The way they played and made jokes, no matter how bad the situation. How she felt with his weight on top of her, holding her in a cocoon of warmth and safety.

The belt finally came undone and dropped to the floor, the codpiece along with it, and she held onto his arms and wrapped her legs around him once again, now feeling his need harden against her thigh. "You are."

He ripped off the mouthpiece again and came in for another kiss, this one hot against her lips with intent. There was no timidity left between them, and their tongues danced together

while her hands moved back to the waistband of the black pants. She rose higher on his waist, and he pinned her harder against the wall, while he shucked off the suit pants, and kicked them away with his metal leg. She whimpered beneath his lips as his naked body rubbed against her. The heat between her legs soaked through her thin pants, and he might as well have been against her naked body.

His hands held either side of his face and pulled her in for another longing kiss, while a light wind grazed at the bare skin of her abdomen. An invisible hand worked its way up her body while Padme giggled against Anakin's lips.

The Force wrapped around her entire body, making it as though Anakin had four arms and two mouths, all working in her service. Using a real hand, Anakin grabbed at the hook in the center of her chest that held her bra together. He undid it in one motion, and threw it carelessly behind them.

He drank in her body with his eyes as she was bared to him, but made no move to touch her. The mouthpiece went back on, and the invisible hands touched her breast. She shuddered as a finger grazed against her nipple, but his real hands were now running through her hair, and his head was buried in her neck once again.

The hands grazed at the elastic of her pants, and Padme untangled herself from Anakin, and pulled them off herself.

He looked at her body again, this time with a familiar fire behind his eyes while he removed his mouthpiece and brought his lips to her breast, kissing and sucking along the nipple until he brought it in his mouth and worked it with his tongue, and she gave a satisfied *mmm*, that turned into a groan when he picked her up again, and her core rubbed against him.

"Anakin," she breathed, not wanting the moment to end, but needing an answer. "Why aren't you touching me?"

He pulled away from her and the blush returned. He averted his eyes when he took two deep breaths into the mouthpiece before turning back to her.

"I want you so much, Padme." He gripped her tighter, and she nearly silenced him when he rubbed against her again. 'I've wanted you since you arrived at the castle.' He nestled his face in her neck again, sucking on skin, inhaling her scent. "It was all I could *think* about." Her core throbbed with need, and she fought to level her mind, to ignore her light head and the phantom hands that roamed her body.

"So why aren't you touching me with your real hands?"

He pulled away from her neck, rested his forehead against hers, and answered simply.

"I have no hands."

She pulled his hand from her hair, and squeezed it to feel the movement underneath. The movement that may have been made of metal and wire, but was still *his*. She guided one hand to her breast, and the other to the heat between her legs.

"I can feel hands."

He laid his forehead against hers again, and ran a single thumb over her center. She let out a shaky moan, and he smiled against her while his thumb moved back and forth, rubbing over

her. A finger sat at her entrance, and his other hand rubbed over her breast, kneading and squeezing, and the metal pinched at her skin, but it made her smile.

He pushed a finger inside her, then another, and curled both while his thumb kept working. He brought her in for another kiss and Padme moaned against his mouth, on the precipice of begging for more, when he leaned down to her ear and whispered, "I have no mouth."

She looked at his lips that were once full, but were now scarred and burned away. Though it took every bit of willpower in her body, Padme pulled his hands into her own, and led him across the freighter. One hand was slicked in her arousal, and she smiled before bringing it up to her lips, kissing and tasting herself on his fingers. .

They got to his chamber and she dropped his hands, leaning against the black chrome.

"Open it."

He laid a single hand on the top and closed his eyes. The chamber cracked open, revealing the clean white interior with a single chair.

"After you." She gestured, and Anakin climbed into the chamber, her immediately after him. He sat in the chair and held onto her waist while she hovered over him, her breasts right at his eyeline. Anakin reached a hand into the air and pressed a button, and the chamber closed.

Another hiss of air, and the two pieces locked together. It was cold and dark, and her head grazed the top when she stood, but she was with him. Anakin dropped his mouthpiece completely and, with his hands on the walls of the chamber, lifted her off the ground with only his eyes, and pinned her to the wall again. He came to his feet, having to crouch so his entire height would fit in the small chamber. He placed his arms on either side, caging her in, while his lips grazed against hers. He left a trail of kisses down her body, stopping only to flick her nipple with his tongue.

While he trailed even lower, she finally confirmed, her voice throaty and desperate. "I can feel a mouth."

The Force still pinned her to the wall, and Anakin kissed and nipped at her thighs, and put the two fingers back inside her before lowering his mouth onto her bud, kissing and sucking it while she curled her toes and writhed against the chamber wall. He reached up his free hand to stroke her breast, and she let out a moan.

"Anakin," she breathed, while her entire body coursed with energy, her chest fluttered, and she felt near to bursting. "Anakin, *please*."

He pulled his mouth away and smiled hungrily up to her. The energy that held her up dropped, and she fell into his awaiting arms. He had to crouch in the chamber, but she wrapped herself around him, positioning herself so her entrance was right at his tip. Their foreheads lay together, and when he entered her, he kissed her with all the intensity of two years apart. And when they were one, when they were together and nothing in the world was between them, she didn't care about Darth Vader, or the Empire, or the scars that mottled their skin. She only cared about them.

Her thighs clenched around him while he thrusted in and out, He held her backside to keep her upright, but hissed and grunted when his head hit the top of the chamber. They laughed

together, and she whispered to him to go to the chair.

He stayed inside of her while he backed into the chair. When he sat down, Padme adjusted herself to take his full length, before slowly moving on top of him.

"Oh," she breathed, and his hands found her breasts again. She moved at her own rhythm, and he looked up at her like she was the only shelter in a sandstorm.

She moved faster and harder and he moved with her, his length rubbing against her core with every movement, and her entire body vibrated around him. "I'm almost there," she breathed, barely able to form coherent words.

"I know." He squeezed her. "We'll do it together."

He peppered kisses all over her face, her neck, her ears, and shoulders, whispering "I love you," between each one.

Padme cried out when she finally released. Anakin still thrusted into her, coming right after her. They breathed against each other, and silence fell over them.

They stayed cuddled together in the chamber, Padme sprawled out across his lap and resting her head on his shoulder, in the kind of serenity that she only found with him. When her eyes closed, Anakin slowly picked her up and put her in the chair. He pulled on his mouthpiece and exited the chamber.

When he came back, he was in his full Darth Vader regalia, with only the cape unattached, which he held in his hands.

Padme fully came to when she heard the deep breath, and looked up with a question in her eyes. He wrapped her in the cape, and picked her up in his arms, carrying her like he did on their wedding night. He walked them over to the bridge of the ship, where she laid across his lap as they watched the lines of hyperspace pass by.

Chapter 13

Padme ran her fingers over the burgundy vest that lay out in front of her. The fabric was so soft that it weighed practically nothing, and it fell from her fingers like water. The golden cap shoulders shimmered under the bright light of the ship, and when she turned it over in her hand, she ran her fingertips over the senatorial rank badge that sat affixed to the chest. She moved to unpin the badge from the vest — she hadn't been a senator in years — when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

The tan pants and shirt hung loosely on her body, and tucking them into the gloves and boots only accentuated how very emaciated she had become during her time in hiding. Fortress Vader brought some of the color back to her cheeks, but two years on the streets changed her body in ways that weren't so easily repaired. Her battle outfit had sat underneath all of her gowns, none of which felt right to wear to a far-fetched and overly hopeful assassination attempt. Right when she was ready to give up on searching through her wardrobe, she found her old vest. She had worn it on General Grievous's ship. She had worn it to Batuu. Though it may have been the least elaborate of her outfits, she wore it nearly every time she went to battle throughout the Clone Wars.

She slipped on the vest, and it fit over her sharp shoulders, recreating a familiar picture. While she fiddled with the rank badge, she remembered the confident senator who fought in battle. The fire inside her that may have wavered, but was never snuffed out.

The rank badge stayed on her vest.

Adjusting the belt and blaster holster, Padme went back out onto the bridge.

Anakin, in his full suit and helmet, sat at the helm of the ship. Without turning around, he said, "We will come out of hyperspace in a few moments."

"Okay." She sat at the co-pilot seat, but made no move to help. She flicked her eyes to the communications console on her side, refusing to look at it directly, and be reminded of her duty. The call she had to make before they landed.

Despite the past two years, despite Darth Vader, despite everything, Padme had a duty. To her home planet of Naboo, and to her old friend Sabe. Killing Sheev was her only option to keep Leia safe, but she was under no delusions about what it would do to the fragile state of the galaxy. Even if Anakin survived, even if he could call off the Imperials...

The Empire had perfected portraying a state of order. It's more gullible citizens believed their society was under a state of controlled procedure. The chaos of the Empire was good at hiding in the cracks and staying under the covers. Darth Vader killing Emperor Palpatine would rip the blanket off and the galaxy would descend into an obvious and uncontrollable madness.

Her insides were so turbulent she thought she'd be sick. Padme closed her eyes, and allotted herself three seconds of anxiety before swallowing it all, and pressed the buttons to contact Sabe.

Anakin turned his head at the clacking of buttons.

“What are you —”

But he was cut off by the Sabe’s visage materializing in front of them, her eyes turning from a wary curiosity, to growing in size when she processed who was calling.

“Padme!?” Sabe sprang to her feet, her eyes wild and jaw dropped. “I...” She took steps closer, leveling her eyes as closely to the console as she could get, like trying to make sure it was really Padme. “I thought you were dead.” Her voice was low and cracked, and it ripped at Padme’s heart for what she put her closest friend through.

“I’m sorry, Sabe.” She cringed inwardly at herself at the bare inadequacy of an apology. There was nothing she could say to change what she did.

What she was about to do.

Sabe barely registered the apology. “I didn’t know what to do after that strange call! You were clearly captured, but somehow calm and collected, I thought you were in danger!”

Anakin turned his head, and Padme decidedly did not look in his direction. He never did discover her use of the communication device in the castle.

“I know, Sabe. I just didn’t want you to come looking for me. It was too risky.”

Sabe spoke to someone off screen, and collected various items around her, strapping them to herself. “So you got away? Where are you now, we will come get you —”

“I’m on my way to Coruscant. But...” She trailed off and smiled sadly at Anakin, who was now on his feet, before looking back at Sabe. “I don’t think we’re gonna make it.”

Anakin stalked out of the bridge, and Sabe stared at her wildly.

“What are you talking about? Is your ship going down? Who’s ‘we’?”

“We...” Padme shook her head and stopped herself, totally unsure how to explain the situation, even to a friend as understanding as Sabe. “We’re going after Palpatine.”

The second the words left her mouth, Padme wished she could shove them all back in. In her head, and talking to Anakin, it all made sense. Palpatine knew about their daughter, and they needed to eliminate him before he went after her, and they would use Anakin’s position to get close enough.

When said aloud to anyone else, it sounded like the plan of an insane person. A person with no prospects of winning.

Sabe made no reaction. Her face did not change at all when she said, “Come again?”

“Palpatine knows. He knows about me.” She paused and looked desperately around the room. “About... Leia.”

Sabe blanched. She held up a finger. “One moment.”

She ran from the room before Padme could even respond. Before she could tell her she didn’t have the time for this conversation, tell her there was nothing Sabe could do to stop her. Certainly not enough time to explain Anakin.

When Sabe returned, two familiar faces flanked her.

Mon Mothma's severe features stared straight through her, and Padme gave her best politician's stare right back. The entire facade was dropped when the face of her old friend Bail Organa came closer.

"I told Bail and Mon everything after your last call," Sabe said. "They know you survived childbirth, how you got away, and where you were hiding for the last two years."

Padme felt the weight of pressure leave her body. It felt good to finally get the truth out. To not have to lie, or use a fake name, or be someone she wasn't. She was Padme, and she survived.

"What we don't know," Mon Mothma's gentle but firm voice took control of the call. "Is how you got away from the Imperial Prison."

She looked around the empty bridge, at a loss for how to make them understand. "I had help."

"Who from?" She asked lightly, but there was a tilt in her voice, like she knew more than she let on.

Before Padme could say anything, the ship door slid open, and Darth Vader filled the entryway. He took two steps into the room, and his black gloved hands were in range of the console.

She looked up at him while she answered. "It's complicated."

Mon Mothma shook her head, disregarding the insufficient answer, while Bail's eyes shined, and stared at the corner of the screen. At the black-gloved hand.

"We have plans in motion. Long range plans that *you* helped create. Assassinating Palpatine wouldn't rid us of his military, and it would potentially destroy the little progress we have made since you were in the Senate."

"Regardless, Palpatine is heavily secured. He's surrounded by guards day and night. A blaster won't kill him."

Bail nodded to the hand that still hovered in the corner. "But he will."

Padme closed her eyes and gestured for Anakin, and he ducked to fit into the screen of the console. The menacing helmet filled the hologram, and Sabe jumped back, while Bail gasped, and Mon kept a deathly calm.

"You're..." For the first time since Padme had known her, Mon Mothma seemed to be at a loss for words. "You're him. Palpatine's second in command. Lord Vader."

A deep breath. "Yes."

"You helped Padme escape the prison ship?"

"Yes."

"You intend to kill Sheev Palpatine." It was not a question.

"Yes."

“Well, Lord Vader,” The use of his title was clearly a mock, and Anakin bristled beside her while Mon continued on. “I don’t know what you’re getting out of this, or why you are helped Padme —”

Bail interrupted, fury clear on his face.

“Because he’s Anakin Skywalker.”

Everything went still. Padme looked at her husband, and his gaze remained focused on Bail Organa. He did not move or breathe, before he finally answered.

“Yes.”

If Mon Mothma was shocked by the revelation, nothing on her face was an indication. She remained totally passive, while Bail shook his head, and Sabe looked from Padme to Anakin, back to Padme, before finally landing on Bail. She opened her mouth in question, when Mon shook her head and continued, not acknowledging Anakin.

“If we have Palpatine’s second in command, it is possible we can turn the tide —”

“Palpatine knows about Leia!” Padme yelled, and threw her hands up in the air. ‘I don’t know if you forgot, but I was a senator. A good one. I fought against war and violence at every turn, I fought this dictatorship until it cost me everything. Palpatine knows about my daughter, and he already used *your* “She nodded at Sabe.” contact to attempt a kidnapping. If I thought there was a diplomatic solution that would keep my daughter safe, believe me when I say that I would have thought of it!’ Padme’s cheeks heated red and her heart pounded in her chest. The very *implication* that she would so thoughtlessly do something to harm to the galaxy — like they forgot who she was. “I made this call as a courtesy. There is nothing you can do to stop me.”

Padme reached to turn off the console, when Bail jumped in front of the screen. His eyes burned, and they never left Darth Vader. “So he knows too. About Leia.”

All the air went out of Padme’s chest. She pinched the bridge of her nose — this was exactly the conversation she didn’t want to have. The conversation they didn’t have the time for.

“Bail, he’s not going to hurt her, or take her —”

With that, Bail went storming out of the shot, and Sabe, with an apologetic look in her eyes, disconnected from the call.

The hologram fizzled out, and Padme and Anakin were left staring at an empty console.

“That was not at all how I wanted that conversation to go.” Padme came to her feet. She had no time to worry about Bail, and she meant what she said. She had no intention of attempting to take her daughter. Only to keep her safe.

Anakin stood and returned to the ship controls and navicomputer, pressing buttons and not looking at her. “We’re coming out of hyperspace.”

With a jolt, the blurred lines turned into stars, and Coruscant hung in the viewport, ready for their conquest.

With a heavy chest and a body that felt like it was being dragged, Padme swallowed her pain again, and went into the Imperial shuttle.

While Vader talked to the ground control (after hearing the masked breathing, they gave him the landing spot he wanted) Padme found prisoner restraints and strapped them on herself. While working the controls for their landing, Anakin turned his head.

"What exactly are you doing?" He gestured to the restraints.

"Making myself look like a prisoner." She thought it was obvious. How often was just anybody allowed to go into Palpatine's throne room? "He does have guards, right? They'll want to know who I am, even if I'm with you."

Anakin huffed. "I don't answer to those red armored fools." He turned back to the controls, and the ship broke the atmosphere of Coruscant, revealing the shimmering city planet below. "Take off the restraints. I will simply kill them." He continued working the buttons as if he didn't just vow murder.

Padme raised an eyebrow, but continued adjusting the restraints. "There's no reason to kill the guards. I'll wear the restraints."

With the ship going into its landing, Anakin turned to face her full on.

"You realize that I'll have to kill the guards at some point? After we go after the Emperor, it will be them or us."

"Won't they answer to you after Palpatine is dead?"

Anakin let out a scratchy huff that might have been a laugh. "No."

Padme felt another crack in her heart at more innocent lives that would be lost that day. The guards were only doing a job.

With the ship landed, Anakin and Padme stood at the ramp of the shuttle, and the noxious fumes of the city already grazed her nostrils. Anakin kept his eyes forward, when he whispered.

"Where is Luke?"

She stopped, and stared at the door of the ship while it opened for them, remembering the face of her blue-eyed baby boy. She had seen holograms of Leia. Luke, though... She hadn't seen Luke since handing him off to Obi-Wan Kenobi after giving birth. She didn't know what color hair he had. If his eyes were still blue. If he had her smile, or his dad's eyes. If he had the power of a Jedi, or if Obi-Wan would teach him how to use it.

When she didn't answer immediately, Anakin continued. "You said Luke went with Obi-Wan," He nearly spit out the name, but continued in a soft tone when talking about their son. "I have been searching for him for two years, and found nothing. I'm a bit curious where he is."

Padme held back a smirk before bursting out in laughter. "He's on Tatooine."

Anakin only stared at her while she continued laughing, until the ramp lowered, and they walked out onto the landing pad of the Emperor's palace — the old Jedi Temple.

The gray landing pad stretched out before her while they descended from the ramp, with Vader's hand resting on her lower back, and the restraints held her wrists so her fingers grazed against his.

"Lord Vader." A man in an Imperial uniform approached, with sweat beading at his brow. A vein in his neck jumped when he looked up at Anakin's mask. "We weren't expecting you. We would have prepared a landing party to —"

"I didn't realize I answered to you." Anakin snapped, and it took all of Padme's lifelong diplomatic training to not guffaw in his face.

"Of course not, Lord Vader. I apologize." The poor man looked like he was about to throw up all over her shoes, when Vader pushed past them.

"I have pressing business with the Emperor. Personally see to it that we are not disturbed."

Anakin pushed on her back, and Padme walked forward, while the man ran back to his fellow comrades. If he had a tail, it would have been between his legs.

When they reached the threshold of the old Jedi temple, Padme paused. She hung in the doorway and peered in what was now home to Palpatine's throne room. What used to be vibrant, open halls was now the cold chrome of Imperial ships. The air of the Jedi Temple once teemed with life, and somehow Palpatine managed to drain the vivacity of even a building.

Padme swallowed. She already accepted her fate if she went in front of Palpatine. All fear was pushed down her chest when she remembered her daughter's smile. The one she got from her father. Fear was nothing next to the fury of a mother.

The gray turned to black the closer they got to Palpatine's throne room — what used to house the Jedi Council Chambers. When they turned the corner, standing at the ready was an armored guard with a red cape, and red armor. Any life that was once his own was hidden beneath that mask.

"Lord Vader," The man's voice was crisp through the helmet. "The Emperor is not expecting you. Did you make an appointment?"

Vader huffed. "I do not make appointments."

His hand guided her around the guard, when a red spear cut her off. A crimson hand now rested on her shoulder. "Then I will bring in the prisoner."

Before she could process what was happening, Padme was gently pushed to the side, and the red spear was aimed at Vader. He dodged away from its tip, and grabbed the spear, snapping it underneath the grip of his hands. The guard moved to attack again, and Vader brandished his lightsaber and swung it down, cutting the red guard across the neck.

The red of the armor turned a molten orange, and his body made a sickening thud when he smacked against the floor.

"Anakin," Padme's mouth felt heavy, and she leaned against the wall, never taking her eyes off the guard. She hissed up at him, while he casually placed the lightsaber back on his belt, as if he didn't understand her cause for upset. "You didn't need to kill him."

Anakin moved in closer, until she was between him and the wall. She did not turn away.

"We are in the heart of the Empire now. We are doing this my way." He lowered his head so they were at eye level with each other, and she saw the blue beneath. "And in my way, I kill anyone who touches you."

She took a deep breath, and the movement of her chest brushed against him. They stared at each other for a beat too long, when the door to the throne room opened before them.

Fog rolled out and filled the corridor, a sharp cold chilling through her. Though he made no sound or move, a disgustingly evil presence emanated from the throne room, so deep that it made her stomach sick and her knees tremble. She stumbled back, for one moment only, doubting every plan she ever made. That deep cold that wanted to send her running, running back to the lower levels, back to Mustafar, to an abandoned planet with B2, all so she would never have to face the impenetrable cold that stood to face her at the end of the corridor.

She straightened her spine and looked up at Anakin, who only remained staring into the throne room. "Do you feel that?" The cold that now bit at her ankles. The kind of cold that couldn't be held off with a coat.

"I always feel that." She moved to stand in front of him, and Anakin whispered. "You can still run. I can die alone."

She let the cold seep into her very bones, before shaking her head in a resolute *no*.

"This time, we die together."

And with that, they entered the throne room of Galactic Emperor Sheev Palpatine.

Chapter 14

The cold turned to ice when Anakin and Padme stepped into the throne room.

Anakin lifted the restraints off her wrists, and rested a hand on the small of her back. Padme didn't argue. If they were about to face Palpatine... It might have been the last time she was touched by her husband. The last time she was touched by anyone.

The Emperor's back was turned. He faced the open window, and looked out onto the setting sun of Coruscant. His fingers, wrinkled, deformed, and heavily scarred, tapped against the arm of the chair. There were no red guards to be seen.

A bad omen.

If there were no guards to be seen, Palpatine had them stationed elsewhere. His red guards, his military leaders, stormtroopers, Mas Amedda... All nowhere to be found.

Just Anakin, Padme, and the man who destroyed them.

"Senator Amidala," Sheev croaked every syllable, drawing each one out as if making them wait for him. "You survived."

She said nothing. There was nothing to say. Anakin still held her, and his eyes bored into his Master — his former Master. His breathing held steady, and the Emperor went on without acknowledging his presence.

Palpatine slowly turned his chair, until his eyes met her own. His face was concealed under a black hood, but his scarring and heavyset wrinkles were obvious — her mentor was gone. He never really existed. The man that sat before them had skin that hung off his face, and blackened lips that cracked with his every utterance. His teeth were rotted brown and yellow, the same color as his eyes that shone through the fog. There was nothing human underneath. No warmth, so semblance of emotion. A black hole that pulled everything into the dark and offered nothing in return. And he was always there. Controlling their every move, treating them like puppets to be played with and tortured at his whim.

Every living being in the galaxy existed only to glorify a man who was barely alive.

"You were always the smart one, Padme." He spit out her name like it was venom on his lips. "Surely you must know that I cannot be killed."

She looked at the scars on his face, his body that only grew more deformed and more withered with every passing minute. And though she knew the truth of his words — the fool's errand of defeating him — the truth sat unspoken on her tongue.

Anyone can be killed.

. And then she turned to Anakin. The man who burned alive on a field of lava and lived to tell the tale. He was encased in a suit, all of his limbs were cybernetic and a machine breathed for him, but he was more human than Sheev Palpatine ever was.

Anyone can be killed, but not Anakin Skywalker. Not Padme and Anakin when they're together. They loved each other, and they were stronger for it, and there was *nothing* Darth Sidious could do about that. Absolutely nothing.

As if reading her thoughts, Palpatine answered the retort that she never spoke aloud. "None of us have to die."

Padme stopped, and looked to Anakin, who remained as still as the beating of her heart. He kept his eyes trained on Palpatine, and his hand curled on the small of her back with every breath that the Emperor took, holding on tighter when he stood to his full height.

Sheev Palpatine once stood with a quiet dignity. Now when he came to his feet, he summoned all the darkness of the room, all the cold, and wielded it as his weapon. He carried no blaster, and made no threat — only the silent promise of using the darkness that coalesced around them.

"My apprentice has only grown weaker. He is a shell of who he once was, and the power that he once wielded was burned to ash in a vain attempt to protect *you*." Though his words attacked Anakin, all the venom went into attacking her, attacking Anakin's love for her. "And now all of your pathetic friends plot to overthrow me, and my apprentice has been too weak to do anything about it. I was going to dispose of him, but now..."

"Now I think we can help each other."

Padme's hand stilled over her blaster, and Anakin shifted his body in front of hers. His masked head slowly, almost indiscernible, moved back and forth in a warning.

"You have nothing I want." The words came out strong, but Padme felt the lie behind them. Sheev Palpatine held her husband's life in her hands. He knew her daughter. He had control of the Republic that she fought for her entire life. There was a chance that Sheev Palpatine had everything Padme ever wanted.

"Don't I?" He whispered. 'I have your *husband*,' He spat the word. "Tied on a leash of my own making. He lives only because I want him to live. The moment he outruns his use to me..."

The harsh breathing of the mask filled the room, and Darth Vader and Darth Sidious stared each other down.

Padme looked from Anakin back to Palpatine, and leveled her own stare. "And what is it you want from me?"

Sidious snapped away from Vader, and his cold stare held her in place. "If I kill you here, I'll have to kill him too. I have no wish to train another apprentice. If you were to join me..."

Palpatine took another step towards her, and his skin was almost transparent, his lips and cheeks cracked, and Padme openly curled her lip in disgust when she looked at this man who stole everything from her — from the entire galaxy.

"I would never join you."

"Oh you wouldn't?" As Palpatine moved closer, Anakin shoved himself in between them, the black figure looming over the entire conversation in a threat that Palpatine ignored. "Your support would cull the rebellion before it began in earnest. All you would have to do is

publicly stand with me, and I'd let you have it all. A seat in the Imperial Senate. A life with your husband, and your daughter. If you refuse..."

Palpatine gestured outside the window, at the Star Destroyers hanging over the cityscape of Coruscant. "If you refuse, I will kill you both here. I'll go to Alderann and kill your daughter. Every Skywalker will be wiped from this planet, and my new apprentice will do what your husband could not, and end the rebellion for me. And the two of you will die here... Forgotten."

Vader remained in front of her. The words from his master barely even registered, as he kept one arm held in front of her, and another on the hilt of his lightsaber. His scratched breathing was the only sound in the room, and she knew — there was never a question in her mind.

She could never stand with Sheev Palpatine. Not even for a hundred years of her perfect life. Not for anything. She closed her eyes and slowly shook her head.

When she opened them, the burning fury of her own soul matched the orange wrath in Palpatine's stare, and she reached for her blaster.

Palpatine barely twitched, when Anakin shot out an arm to push her back.

But it was too late. A shock hit her system, lighting up her entire body with bolts of blue and white. What she thought was the sound of lightning was actually the screams leaving her body as she went sailing across the throne room. Her back slammed against the hard chrome, and she fell to the floor, each of her senses fizzling out until everything went black.

Sabe's booted feet pounded against the cold chrome of the former Jedi Temple. After evading Imperials and stunning a stormtrooper, she finally made it to what was once a powerful edifice that practically vibrated with power, with serene gardens, complete with statues and landscaping, all designed to celebrate the beauty of the world, of life itself — and was now a cold shell of a building, standing only as a cold reminder of the Emperor.

One evil, powerful man that her Queen meant to face alone.

Padme Amidala, though she didn't use her name for two years, never really forgot who she was. She never died. She was never gone.

And now Sabe was on yet another hopeless mission to save her Queen from her own reckless self.

Despite herself, despite the severity of the situation, Sabe smiled. She slid down hallways, around corners, not allowing herself a second to contend with the fact that she hadn't run into anymore Imperials. Like Palpatine sent them away. Like they were elsewhere, awaiting orders.

Padme was going to save her daughter, save her husband, and save herself, but the galaxy might not be so lucky.

With her singular focus on finding her way to the throne room, of being there one final time for her Queen, she didn't notice when she slammed into a solid wall.

A solid wall that took the form of Bail Organa, who let out a grunt when their bodies slammed into each other.

Sabe's head bounced off of Bail's and the searing crack, combined with the spots in her vision sent her stumbling to the ground. Bail let out a groan and held his head where it collided with her own

"What are you doing here?!" Sabe hissed, looking down both sides of the corridor, as if she were afraid that Palpatine himself was about to saunter around the corner. "I thought you went to Alderaan!"

Bail grunted and offered a hand to Sabe, which she took to steady herself.

"I contacted Breha, and told her to take Leia somewhere safe. Mon is gathering what few allies we have. I'm here to make sure Padme succeeds." He paused and leveled her with a stare. "And I contacted someone else. A... friend. Someone who might help us take care of Vader."

Sabe sputtered, and the world spun around her. She whispered, still afraid of passing Imperials.

"*Take care of Vader?!* He's *working* with Padme now." She stopped, and remembered the Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker. Though they never spoke of it, Sabe knew the truth of Padme's marriage since the very day it happened. She watched as Padme's heart broke every time he went off to war. Watched her eyes light up every time he returned. "We can't just... kill him. He's Padme's husband. He's our best hope of the Imperial forces standing down."

"He is a threat to my daughter —"

"We can't just *kill* Anakin Skywalker, he's a war hero —"

Bail spun around and faced her, his eyes wild.

"Anakin Skywalker is a war *criminal*, he's loyal to the Emperor, and *he* is the biggest threat to the safety of my daughter and this galaxy! There is no peace as long as Darth Vader is alive."

Sabe turned her gaze to the ground, and Bail sighed, his tone turning softer.

"I understand, Sabe. But Padme is not safe with him either. That man you remember? The handsome Jedi Knight that fought in the Clone Wars? He died two years ago. He's gone, and he left Darth Vader in his wake."

Before she could say anything, before she could tell Bail, *no, I won't do that to my Queen*, they were interrupted by a pair of stomping feet.

Two yellow horns stood straight up in the air, and the blue shadow of Mas Amedda filled the corridor. He held his speakers' staff at his side, and Bail and Sabe flattened themselves against the wall, hoping to avoid his notice.

The most complicit man from the old Republic. Without whom, Palpatine wouldn't have ascended to power with such ease. He worked to keep the Senators in the Chancellor's favor, all while selling out their democracy for the price of his own power. Palpatine was the obvious villain, but this man... Sabe would smile to see this man dead alongside his liege.

Sabe whispered. "There is no peace as long as *that* man is alive."

The blast hit Mas Amedda in the upper right arm, his blaster falling to the floor clumsily while he yelled out, though it did not stop his charge. Sabe stood, ready to fight, and Bail grabbed her by the arm.

"Find Padme. Help her. I'll take care of Amedda."

Wasting no time dwelling on good-byes, Sabe charged down the corridor, away from the bleeding Grand Vizier, and away from Bail Organa.

Her feet carried her away from the fight, away from the grunts of pain, some of which might be from her friend, away from the violent release, until all she heard was the sound of her own breath.

She slowed her pace to a walk, and came upon a heap of red fabric stained with redder blood, and a dead face hidden behind a mask. The man had no name, nothing distinctive about him. This was the cost of the Empire — anonymous sacrifices made by men who would only be replaced by another invisible entity. And the cycle continued on and on.

That's when she heard it — from the open double doors at the end of the corridor, came the voice of her Queen. She wore her burgundy vest with golden capped shoulders, and while she stood defiantly in the face of evil she looked every bit the Queen she always was. Darth Vader stood by her, and he was both audacious and reserved at the same time, hovering protectively by Padme's side, but allowing her to do all the talking.

When he stood with Padme, she could see it. The way he moved, the way he glowered. Anakin Skywalker had returned.

And inching closer towards them, was a figure shrouded in black. So covered in darkness he didn't even seem human, his cruel yellow eyes the only light in the room. Eyes that could drain life from even the strongest fighter.

Except Padme. She reached for her blaster, never backing down in the face of incomprehensible fear, and before she could aim, she was hit in the heart. By a strong white bolt, her ear-piercing scream nothing next to the sound of Darth Vader's roar when she fell to the floor.

Sabe stood shocked, her own heart pounding in her ears, fighting her brain to forget the vision of lightning coming out of a man's hand, lightning that left her Queen lying motionless on the floor.

Darth Vader flashed his crimson lightsaber and held off the bolt sent toward him, using the power of his size to gain ground on Palpatine, until their faces were separated only by the white on red, the lightsaber holding off the lightning.

Just when Sabe thought he might win, that there might be some hope yet in this veritable tragedy, Palpatine laughed. A cold, mirthless laugh, before he ripped the lightsaber out of Vader's hands, and as it clattered down, another bolt of lightning tossed Darth Vader helpless to the floor.

Her entire body fought when she opened her eyes.

She didn't realize how many muscles it took to do something simple until every nerve was screaming at her to stop, until she felt the lightning pouring through her veins like blood. When Padme opened her eyes, the pressure in her forehead nearly burst, and her cheekbones cried out in agony. When she took a breath, the rise and fall of her chest sent a whimper out of her lips.

And her lips when she made a sound felt liable to crack apart in neverending pain that ripped through her body.

She was shot with Force lightning, and for a moment the pain was so great, she could hardly remember where she was.

"She's dead." The words slithered out of Palpatine's mouth, and Padme, not able to muster the energy to turn over, could hear lightning as it struck, and the sound of Anakin's cry when it hit him. "She's dead because *you* weren't enough to save her."

Another bolt, and Vader's mechanical voice cried out louder.

"You were never enough to save her from me."

Palpatine's voice grew colder, more passionate, more filled with rage with every bolt he struck into Vader's chest. This wasn't just another play at more power, or an attempt to save himself. To Sheev Palpatine, this was personal.

When another bolt struck, Vader hit the ground and shook the floor with his weight, letting out a feral growl as more strikes hit him.

"You weren't enough to save her as Anakin Skywalker," He spit out the name, like it filled his every atom with hate. 'And now you aren't enough to save her as Darth Vader.' His voice grew higher with every strike. "I will keep you alive if only so I can kill her every night in your dreams, so you can watch as I kill your daughter, so you can know that you were never anything more than a *slave* to me! You were *born*, created by the Force, to serve *me* ."

The fire that burned through Padme was something else. A fire that warmed, that held off the cold. Something energizing, something that gave her the power that she needed to lift her head, and see her husband on the floor, fending off the lightning. Palpatine thought she was easy to kill. He thought Anakin was his to be toyed with until he grew bored.

"I won't stop until every last Skywalker is *dead!*"

And when she flicked her eyes upward, right beside her head, discarded on the floor, was a silver hilt trimmed in black. The lightsaber of a Sith. With one push of a button, a crimson light with a soul of kyber would come to life. A soul of kyber to destroy the man who had no soul.

She reached her arm across, even though every muscle screamed at her from the inside, with all the electricity running through her veins, electric light that somehow felt personally tailored to hate her, to shoot pain through every inch of her body specifically.

Her hand covered the cool silver of the hilt, and she made no noise when she came to her knees, even though her entire body begged her to lie back down, to let it end.

The room grew dizzy around her, but she held onto that fire inside. The day turned to night in the city of Coruscant, and now all that lit up the room was Palpatine's bolts of lightning.

He didn't see her coming. He had already written her off.

Palpatine's taunts were over, and the entire throne room was filled only with his vile laughter as Vader writhed on the floor. As Padme limped closer, dragging a foot behind her, Vader's screams lessened in strength, and eventually he put his arms down. He only lay on the floor, taking all the hate that Sheev Palpatine produced and sent into his body, into his organs and mechanical limbs alike, and Anakin Skywalker finally gave up. Finally let someone else win.

Though she only walked a few feet, it felt like miles. Every screaming inch of her body wanted to lay down until everything went black, wanted the miserable pain to finally end. She only gripped the hilt tighter. It was heavier than Anakin's blue lightsaber, so heavy she held it with both hands.

Palpatine's laughter turned to gleeful screams as he vowed, "After I am done with you, I will go to Alderaan and finally kill *the last Skywalker!*"

Padme stood only a hair behind him and as Anakin's scratchy breath finally gave way, Padme pressed that button to turn on the soul of kyber and watched it skewer Sheev Palpatine's chest.

The lightning stopped, and Sheev let out a pathetic *ugh*, when Padme pulled his fleshy shoulder and whispered in his ear, "That is from my son that you never knew about." Palpatine's yellow eyes looked toward her, and his lip curled in disgust.

He lifted his hand, and Padme moved the blade to cut him off at the wrist, and watched as his sickening blackened nails fell to the floor. "That is from my daughter."

An invisible hand choked around her throat, a final feeble attempt to win from a dying man. Padme let the grip tighten, let all of the pain of the lightning ravage her body, while she shoved the lightsaber deep into his belly. Palpatine foamed at the mouth, and shoving the saber deeper until the hilt touched the fabric of his cloak, Padme said, "That is from Anakin Skywalker."

Padme turned the blade off, and Palpatine fell to the floor in a sad heap of black. The cold dissipated and all that was left was the flicker of life in Palpatine's eyes, hanging on so desperately, pleading with the world and the universe that he didn't lose, that he wasn't bested, that he wasn't bested by a Skywalker. By Padme Naberrie Amidala Skywalker.

Her hand went limp, finally relaxing, and the lightsaber fell to the ground at her feet. Palpatine garbled his meek attempt at last words, and Padme finally pulled her blaster out of its holster.

"And this is from me."

The blast went off, and Sheev Palpatine became nothing more than a sad sack of bones and flesh, to one day dissolve into the nothing that he always had been.

Padme limped to her husband's body and fell on top of it. She listened to his straggling heartbeat and held his mechanical hand in her own. With her final surge of energy, the last bit

that her body had to give, Padme pulled the helmet off his head.

“Anakin?” She whispered as tears fell down her cheeks. She put her fingers to his skin one last time, and for a shadow of a second, Darth Vader smiled. He opened his eyes, just as blue as the day she went to Tatooine dressed as a peasant. She sniffled. ‘We did it. Our children are safe.’ He lifted a finger to graze her cheek. “We don’t have to fight anymore. We can lay down.”

Anakin let out a shaky breath, and kept his hand caressing her face. His final word was a hoarse whisper, but he never let go of her. “Together.”

She smiled down at him one last time before collapsing on his chest and giving way to the blackness.

Chapter 15

The light from the rising sun of Coruscant pierced through the veil of Emperor Palpatine's medcenter and reflected into Padme's eyes. She lifted an arm to shield herself from the burning light, but everything in the newly minted medcenter reflected and shined like it had never been used before.

Droids bustled about, but none of them tended to her. The broken wiring of Darth Vader's hand hung limply on the bed beside hers, and when she realized that she no longer heard his scratched breathing, she pushed on her hands to lift herself up.

Every muscle screamed at her as she remembered the searing pain from Palpatine's lightning. She remembered being thrown across the room, all the blood in her veins electrified. She remembered the taunts as her husband barely clung to life. And she remembered a stray lightsaber that she plunged into Sheev Palpatine's back, before falling to what she thought was her own demise. She collapsed on Anakin's chest, pulled his helmet off, and heard his breath hitch.

Still too weak to hold herself up, Padme fell back to the bed and only moved her neck. A crew of medical droids moved around Anakin, each of them repairing a different part of his body. The life support machine beeped steadily beside him. She released a breath she didn't realize she was holding, and her mouth curved upwards in the slightest hint of a smile.

Her eyes fluttered, and just when she was about to give way to sleep, a distant voice cut into her consciousness.

"She killed the Emperor." The voice was sharp and loud, and in her stupor, Padme didn't recognize it. "She should be executed for high treason."

"Treason?" Padme did recognize the measured calm of Mon Mothma. "Senator Amidala should be lauded as a war hero. The savior of the galaxy."

"Unfortunately I don't think Palpatine's many supporters will see it that way."

Padme stirred, reaching for the voices, trying to defend herself, trying to tell them that Palpatine threatened her children, but what came from her mouth was only whimpers, and though she used every bit of will left in her body, her arms and legs only tingled for all her effort and wouldn't move.

"My lady." A voice broke through her fog, and Padme turned to see a face that looked so much like her own, a face so familiar that her pain was forgotten.

"Sabe," she whispered and reached out for her friend. Sabe gave a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, but held Padme's hand nonetheless. "Tell them..."

Sabe nodded her head almost imperceptibly. Her eyes scanned the room, and when she looked back at Padme, she lifted her hand to caress her face, her brown eyes growing bigger and her lower lip trembled.

She stabbed a needle into Padme's arm, her mouth forming the words *I'm sorry*.

When her senses fuzzed around the edges, for a moment she was back in the birthing room. She held her babies, and looked into the warm, sad eyes of Obi-Wan Kenobi. *There's still good in him*. The words are on her lips, but she's not sure if she says them out loud.

Finally, she reached one last time for the hand built of broken wiring, and it finally reached back, both of them keeping grip on each other while the world fell away around them.

This time when she woke up, she was seated upright in a ship's cabin, on a hard bed built into the wall, and a ray shielded entryway. A prison cell.

She supposed there were worse ways for this to end. Her expectation going into the fight with Palpatine was that she'd die fighting to save her daughter, never knowing if she succeeded even when she took her last breath. The scars from the broken window on Mustafar were cleaned up and sealed, and Padme flexed her fingers, marveling at the numbness that answered. The stinging ache of her scars was gone.

Scars. A deep scar that cut across a head, scars that lined cheeks and eyes and a throat, and Padme sprang to her feet, all previous lethargy replaced with a singular motivation.

"Excuse me?" She called to the guard outside her door. Apparently the ray shield wasn't enough, she also needed armed guards. "Excuse me, sir?"

The man's shoulders bristled, but he made no move to respond, or even turn to look at her. She sidled up to the ray shield so she was a mere breath away from his side, and used her most queenly voice. "Where exactly am I?"

The guard glanced at her side-long, and took a deep breath before finally answering. "You're on the ship of Bail Organa, Chancellor to the Republic."

Padme nodded.

"And where is Bail? I need to speak with him, it's urgent."

The guard sneered. "The Chancellor has specifically demanded not to see you."

Though she could hardly be surprised, the revelation burned in her chest. It didn't matter if she killed Palpatine every day for the rest of her life; Bail would never forgive her for telling Anakin about their daughter.

"And what of Darth Vader?" She snarled, thinking of the limp wired handed that held hers in the medcenter. 'I know he's alive.' She had to believe it. "Is he in another cell?"

The guard turned away from her and continued staring at the wall.

"Excuse me!?" Her voice was nearly yelling, but she plowed on. "I know you can hear me."

The silence brimmed between them, and Padme stood right against the ray shield."

"Where is Darth Vader!?"

“Leave us.”

Sabe appeared from beside the guard, and pointed her head down the hallway with a raised eyebrow. “Now, please.”

“Yes, my lady.” The guard deferred to Sabe, and quickened his pace down the corridor. Sabe pressed a button to lift the shield.

With the corridor clear, Sabe and Padme stared at each other, before Padme fell into her old friend’s arms. She smelled like the pears from Naboo trees, like the grass swaying under gentle winds. She smelled like home.

They held each other for a few moments, before Padme pulled away, placed her hands on Sabe’s shoulders, and asked. “Where is he?”

She didn’t need to say who.

Sabe opened her mouth, then closed it. She gestured toward the hard bed where Padme woke up, and they wearily sat down.

Padme took a deep breath and her cheeks went red hot, and she felt like her heart was liable to burst out of her chest at any moment. Sabe looked at her with sad eyes, but Padme was so *sure* Anakin survived, she *felt* him. After all this time, after all they’d been through, she’d know if Anakin was dead.

“Sabe,” she whispered. “Where is my husband? Did he...” She drifted off, unable to finish the sentence.

“Darth Vader survived the battle.”

Padme let out her breath, and a dry sob released with it, a sob that she’d been holding in since waking up. They *survived*. Like they always did.

“Anakin. He’s Anakin.”

“He’s also Darth Vader.” Sabe leveled her gaze, before finally giving a small, almost indecipherable smile. “He nearly didn’t make it. That suit was designed to exacerbate the pain from the lightning... It deteriorated his body more quickly than if he was just an organic being. Almost like his life support system was designed to weaken him to that attack.”

Padme’s entire body went hot, and she remembered Sheev’s pathetic body lifeless at her feet.

“In fact, that entire life support design... The med droids said that it was like the creator of the suit wanted him in as much pain as possible. The suit and life support was all that kept him alive, but it did so in a way that living couldn’t have been pleasant at all.”

Padme closed her eyes and nodded. “To feed the anger. To feed the dark side.”

Padme opened her eyes again and Sabe nodded solemnly. “Yes, I suppose so. Darth Vader — Anakin — he’s a cyborg. He will always be a cyborg. We couldn’t restore his lungs, chest, or throat, or make any more advanced cybernetic limbs than he already had... But they were able to dilute the pain. Properly treat his burns. He’ll always require life support, but perhaps it need not be so miserable.”

Padme nodded, burying her face in her hands.

"Where is he?" She whispered before peaking out at Sabe, who set her mouth in a straight line.

"He was offered a deal. Call off the Imperial troops, and we'll give him a prison sentence."

Padme nodded and finished the sentence for her. "Rather than execution."

She put her head back in her hands, and Sabe made an attempt at comfort. "He took the deal, but you... You will not spend your days in prison, my lady. You have not committed a crime — you saved the galaxy!" She shook her head, her voice exasperated. "Bail is only worried about Leia. Me and Mon will talk to him, and you'll be out of her soon. You're Padme Amidala. You *killed Palpatine*." Sabe shook her head, and her eyes grew big in disbelief. "You can't be kept here."

Yes. She was Padme Amidala. Former Queen. Former Senator. Mother to Luke and Leia, and now she was slayer of the Emperor. And after all that, after she gave up everything and did her duty, after innumerable unthinkable tragedies, she *still* wouldn't get to be with him.

Thundering footsteps sounded down the corridor, and Sabe's head snapped up. She sprung to her feet, holding a hand behind her as if telling Padme to stay seated.

Padme jumped up to her friend's side as the footsteps grew louder and closer, and blaster shots fired, and even when she went right up to the door, Padme couldn't see the commotion.

A black cape swished around the corner, and she knew before she saw his face.

Anakin had no helmet, just a piece that connected from his life support into his mouth. The burns that brandished his face were treated and healed, and there was no scratched breathing to fill the spaces between them. Anakin stood on the other side of the doorway, moving out of the way of blaster shots before they happened, before finally turning.

All anger drained from his face, and his eyes grew when he looked at her.

"Padme."

There was no modulator. No deep machine that spoke for him, and nothing but space between them. The sound of blaster fire was a light roar behind her ears, and Padme's chest lifted and tears sprang to her eyes.

Sabe shouted from inside the cell, "Hold your fire!"

The blasting stopped, but Anakin stayed outside the cell, looking in and eyeing Sabe curiously.

"Miss," one of the Republic soldiers came up beside Anakin, who only snarled in his direction. 'He called off the Imperial troops, but then choked one of our officers, demanding to know where his wife was.' The soldier looked in at Padme, assessing who she was, and putting the pieces together. "I guess he found her." He took restraints out of his belt holster. "I'll need back-up to properly apprehend him."

Before the man could take his life into his own hands and attempt to restrain Anakin, Sabe held up a hand. "It's okay, sir." She looked in Anakin's eyes, and showed no fear. She smiled

slightly. "You can come in."

Anakin took a delicate step into the room. He held Padme's eyes, but stole a quick glance at Sabe, who nodded in response, before sending the guards away, stepping outside the cell, and flashing the ray shield back to life.

Locking them in together.

"Padme," he whispered, and took a lock of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers, savoring every inch. "We made it."

She fell into his arms, and with his hands on her waist, and then her shoulders, and stroking through her hair, and her head buried into his chest, it was like no time had passed at all. Like it was just Anakin and Padme together on Naboo, and nothing horrible had happened, and they had their entire lives ahead of them.

"I called off the troops," Anakin said. "I put on the voice modulator for the last time, and called them off. I think it worked for most, but the Republic is going to be fighting remnants of the Empire for a long time. They have the capital, that's most important right now. I gave them what information I could."

Padme pulled away and looked into his eyes, trying to find his meaning, his reason for telling her all this.

"And they could use the best Senator that the Republic ever had." Anakin placed a hand on her shoulder and gave his casual half smirk, pride gleaming in his eyes. "The Republic needs you. I won't fight the guards anymore. I only wanted... I wanted to make sure you were okay. That you could still live your life."

She didn't know when she started crying, but a gentle gloved hand wiped away her tears. "I'll be okay," he promised.

"Anakin." She choked and grabbed his hand and rested her head upon it, savoring every moment, refusing to let even one second go to waste. "How can I just... go back to work, knowing that you're rotting away in a prison cell, growing old alone? How can I live knowing that you're unhappy?"

"Unhappy?" He took his hand from her cheek, and used it to lift her chin to look him in the eyes. "How could I be unhappy? You're alive. You're safe. Our babies are safe. I don't care what happens to me now."

Padme choked on her sob, and pulled Anakin to her lips. They held each other and cherished every partial second as she ran her fingers along his healing scars, as she felt safe in his arms for one last time.

"I wish," she wiped her tears and cleared her voice, looking up at him. "I wish we could just be normal... That you could just be a husband and I could just be a wife, and we could spend every night looking out at the stars and holding our babies."

Anakin swallowed, and his voice came out thick and strained. "I do too. But I'm the one who ruined..." He looked down. "You can still have all that."

She sniffled. "Not without you. Never."

He pulled her back into her chest and stroked her hair, and Padme couldn't have said how long they stood like that when a voice interrupted them.

"My lady?" Sabe opened up the ray shield and looked in.

Anakin and Padme pulled apart, and Padme pleaded with Sabe with her eyes, sent her a message saying, *please, not yet, just a little longer*.

"I have an errand I must attend to." Padme nodded and swallowed her tears. She looked up at Anakin and tried to burn his eyes into her memory, tried to hold on to any scrap of him that she could. A small piece of lint from his shirt, the feeling of his skin under her fingertips. "General Skywalker will have to go back to his cell when I return."

"Oh..." Padme stared at her friend and found nothing in her eyes. Anakin's arms remained still around her, and she could hear his heartbeat through the bulk of his life support. "When you come back..."

"Yes, when I come back." Sabe's eyes glistened as she held Padme's gaze. "It's important to say goodbye."

"Yes, it is."

"When you are finished with General Skywalker, I'll bring you to your ship that we found, so you can say goodbye to the droids too. It won't take long. It's only in Hangar Bay 5."

The room pulsed around her, and Padme's heart thundered in her chest. Did she dare even hope...? She said nothing, only stared at her oldest friend in the world, who smiled sadly back at her.

"When you say goodbye, I suggest telling him how much he meant to you. How much you love him. That you'll never forget or betray him."

Padme's eyes filled with tears, but the weight in her chest was finally lifting, and she felt something suspiciously like hope.

"I will always love him. And I'll never forget what he's done for me."

Sabe nodded at Padme, then at Anakin. She stole one final look at Padme, and smiled before turning the corner, leaving the ray shield down behind her.

When Sabe's footsteps died, Padme and Anakin looked at each other, barely daring to smile.

And they ran from the cell.

When the hangar cleared out, Padme and Anakin ran across to their waiting ship, and saw B2 standing on the ramp. Like she knew they were coming.

"Mistress!" Padme never thought she'd be so happy to see a server droid. "We were getting worried. FX wanted to stage a break-out, and I had to talk him down."

The ship was oddly like an old comfort as they passed the compression chamber, and Padme touched the walls, thinking of time — all the time in the world, time that was theirs.

Anakin took his place at the pilot's seat and called to K5. "I need you to get us to hyperspace as fast as possible." He pressed buttons on the control, and Padme took a seat beside him. Padme and Anakin at the controls of the ship. Running away together.

Like no time had passed at all.

Anakin called to the droid again. "And when we land, I'll need you help getting a message to an old friend."

K5 and Anakin worked at the controls, and Padme shifted in her seat. "You know, we'll need to go somewhere discreet."

Anakin smirked at her. "I know."

"So where are you taking us?"

While pulling the lever down, Anakin leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss on her lips. "Where you've always belonged."

The stars blurred to hyperspace around them.

Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away, there was a princess and a farm boy.

The princess lived in a land of sprawling green fields, snow-capped mountains, in the Royal Palace of Alderaan. Her mother was the Queen of Alderaan, and her father the Supreme Chancellor of the New Republic, slayer of Grand Vizier Mas Amedda, crucial to the overthrowing of the short-lived Empire. Princess Leia Organa loved her lands, and would assume the role of Queen one day... But still, she would stand out on the palace patio at night and stare at the stars as they glistened alongside the mountain peaks, and dream.

The farm boy lived on a dusty brown planet, far off from the brightest light in the galaxy. His homestead sat on the sand dunes of Tatooine, home to the Jawa's, the Tusken Raiders, bantha's, krayt dragons, and an old wizard called Ben Kenobi. His Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru taught him the family trade, and showed him how to live in the dangerous lands of his home, but it was old Ben that was never far behind when the farm boy was in trouble. It was Ben Kenobi that told him of his father, the best starfighter pilot in the galaxy, and his mother, the Queen of Naboo. Luke Skywalker loved his family, and didn't expect any bigger destiny than the one laid out before him... But still, he would stand out on the sand dunes every night and stare at the stars that shined with the red and yellow suns of Tatooine, and dream.

But then, on a normal day like any other, old Ben invited 19 year old Luke on a trip to the distant land of Alderaan. Against the wishes of Owen and Beru, Luke joined Ben on his trip. Ben asked Luke to start calling him, "Obi-Wan."

When they arrived at the Royal Palace of Alderaan, Luke saw more green than he'd ever seen before. He saw lakes of water, mountains of snow, and clear clean air that didn't fill his lungs with dust. But, even more breathtaking than all the beautiful landscapes of Alderaan, he saw the princess.

Her hair hung to the middle of her back in a thick braid that twisted around her head in a crown. She wore a white-caped gown with a silver belt on her hips, while Luke wore rags

sewn to protect his skin from the sand. She had the eyes of a doe, and his eyes were the color of the lake outside the castle. And when they met, they smiled at each other, lit up like the twin suns of Tatooine.

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Bail and Breha Organa sat them down and told them the truth — the entire truth, not the truth “from a certain point of view” about their parents... Their shared birth parents. That their love was forbidden, but they married anyway, and their love created Luke and Leia. That their father loved their mother so much, he tore apart the world to keep her. That they both loved their children so much, they risked their lives and brought down an Empire to keep them safe. That no matter how alone they felt when they stared at the stars at night, there was Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala, living in hiding, staring at the stars with them.

Leia raged. Called them all liars. Obi-Wan laughed. He said, “You have the smile of your mother, and the spirit of your father.”

And Obi-Wan gave them his one secret; the secret he kept even from Bail Organa. “After they escaped custody, your father found me. He gave me this.”

He flipped into Luke’s hand, a single tracking beacon. It flashed in his palm, and Luke’s father was on the other end of it.

Obi-Wan held the children of Anakin Skywalker, and said, “You do not have to see them if you don’t wish — but they are waiting for you. They’ve always been waiting for you.”

The following day, Luke and Leia got into an Alderaanian ship, and connected the tracking beacon to the navicomputer, following the path to Iego.

“Iego?” Leia stared at the map with an eyebrow lifted. “Have you ever been to Iego?”

Luke shook his head. “I’ve heard of it though. The deep space pilots that come through Mos Eisley say that’s where the angels live. On the moons of Iego.”

Leia snorted. “Angels?”

“They’re supposed to be the most beautiful creatures in the universe.”

“Sir,” Leia’s droid C3PO sidled up behind them, with his strange little counterpart R2-D2 beside him. “Those are not actually angels. Those are called the Diathem, and they are —”

“3PO, why don’t you go take an oil bath?” Leia raised her eyebrows at the droid, and stole a glance at Luke, who stifled a giggle. “It’s gonna be a long flight.”

“Certainly mistress.”

On the 525th moon of Iego, Luke and Leia landed their ship. Night had already fallen, and their tracking beacon lit up red when they stepped out into the open field. A small house sat in the distance, and the tracking beacon grew brighter with every step.

Mother and father met son and daughter in the center of the field, the two beacons lit up as they found their other halves. What they’d been searching for.

The stars in Iego shined clearer than they did on Tatooine, or even on Alderaan. They shined so bright, that they lit up the entire planet. The stars that Luke stared at every night,

dreaming of a bigger life. That stars that Leia looked at from Alderaan. The stars that Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala looked up at every night while they lived their completely normal and completely boring lives together, hoping their children could feel their love across space and time.

Stars that kept the Skywalkers together even as they lived on separate ends of the galaxy.

On one of the moons of Iego, where the angels live,, Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, C3PO, R2-D2, Padme Amidala, and Anakin Skywalker held each other and stared up at the night sky.